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Issue 180

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PS4



STEAM

SQUARE ENIX

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WE REVEAL THE HISTORY OF THE
MAGICAL GIRL GENRE TO CELEBRATE THE
RELEASE OF BATTLE GIRL HIGH SCHOOL!



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WELCOME

WELCOME TO issue 180 of NEO! We've got so much going on inside this issue, I don't know where to start! How about our magical girl feature on page 008, where David West plunges into a whistle-stop tour of the genre to uncover what keeps audiences coming back in droves? Or Alex

Jones' examination of the popularity of *Yuri!!! on Ice*, in preparation for its upcoming release on DVD and Blu-ray here in the UK this month? Or, you could flip the mag and indulge in some great coverage of *Valkyria Chronicles*, just in time for the release of the latest instalment of the franchise this month from SEGA!

We also have a couple of controversial new shows currently streaming in Japan on the chopping block over in our regular anime exposé section, which starts on page 030. Let us know on social media what you think about *Banana Fish* and *Happy Sugar Life*: both of them are sure to split opinions amongst anime fans!

Elsewhere this issue, find some back to school uniform inspiration in our manga school on page 036 – but with a twist! We also have a quick guide to getting started with South Korean skincare on page 088, as well as a rundown of some amazing Japanese summer festivals on page 034. All that, and a bumper photo spread of some incredible cosplay over on page 054! Enjoy!

Until next time!



GEMMA COX, EDITOR

MEET THE TEAM

Mitchell Lineham



"I've been playing *Kingdom Hearts: Dream Drop Distance*, and it's great seeing a bunch of new Disney worlds. *Dragon Ball Z Kai* has been my go-to anime, and I visited the Harry Potter Studio Tour (again), which I highly recommend!"

Tom Smith



"My trek up Mount Fuji was cancelled due to one of the strongest typhoons for 25 years hitting Japan! To be honest, I was a bit relieved – just clambering up the stairs to exit Shinjuku station had me bursting out in a sweat!"

David West



"I've been burning through too many hours of daylight playing *Yakuza Kiwami 2*. On the music front, I've just discovered my new favourite band from Taiwan in the form of Elephant Gym, who play inventive, proggy math-rock. Nice."

Emily Valentine



"I've been chatting to Ladybeard, one half of Deadlift Lolita – a 'kawaii core' band who fuse heavy metal with cute Japanese pop... and power-lifting! They're definitely bringing something pretty unique to the global music scene."

Ruth Keattch



"Autumn starts to bring the comic conventions back into the calendar, which means making sure there are enough comics printed to last the season for sale on my table, as well as any extra merchandise!"

Jacob Boniface



"I got a chance this month to check out the latest *Valkyria Chronicles* game and try the demo! As a longtime fan of the series, *VC4* does not disappoint – can't wait to get my hands on the full version!"

Andrew Osmond



"If you were able to see the live-action Japanese film *One Cut of the Dead* at London's Frightfest (or anywhere else), you'll know it's a wonderful surprise – certainly not your common or garden zombie movie. Old Romero would have loved it!"

Jonathan Clements



"Secret anime love? I don't know if the makers of HBO's *Sharp Objects* are Satoshi Kon fans, but the way the flashbacks are cut into the story comes out as very *Perfect Blue*."

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BREAKING THE SPELL

Schoolgirls save the world in *Battle Girl High School*, but what does the magical girl archetype reveal about Japan? NEO's David West discovers a world of wish fulfilment, frilly outfits, obedient housekeepers, and fearless heroines.

IN *BATTLE GIRL High School*, our lovely planet Earth was overrun by the hostile invaders known only as the Irous, who poisoned the atmosphere with their deadly miasma. Mankind was driven from the globe but regrouped to launch the counterattack that reclaimed humanity's home. At the frontline of the fight to drive out the Irous, and to repel their continued incursions, are the Hoshimori girls – the Star Guardians of the Shinjugamine Girls Academy. These brave young ladies wield weapons and celestial armour that draws power from the Holy Tree that protects them in battle against the invaders, but when they're not locked in combat with the enemy, they just want to be normal teenagers, hanging out and having fun.

The magical girl is one of the most recognizable archetypes in anime. The original magical girl was *Sally The Witch*, who debuted in 1966. Inspired by the US TV sitcom *Bewitched*, it was the story of a witch who comes to Earth where she befriends two schoolgirls and decides to stick around, trying to hide her magical abilities from all but her closest friends. Fifty years later, the magical girl genre is still going strong, but have the passing years seen any evolution in the portrayal of these characters? Are they mere fantasy figures, or do they reflect the times in which they are created?

THE TIMES THEY AREN'T A'CHANGING

First, a little history. In 1600 the Tokugawa clan seized power in Japan, beginning a reign of Tokugawa military rulers that lasted until 1868 – three and a half centuries. During this period, every aspect of Japanese life was carefully regulated, from the class system that kept the peasants in their place, to the type of clothing each class could wear and their hairstyles, to rules governing where households could construct their toilets. Contact with foreigners and international travel was both forbidden, the latter punishable by death.

What relevance does this have to magical girl anime?

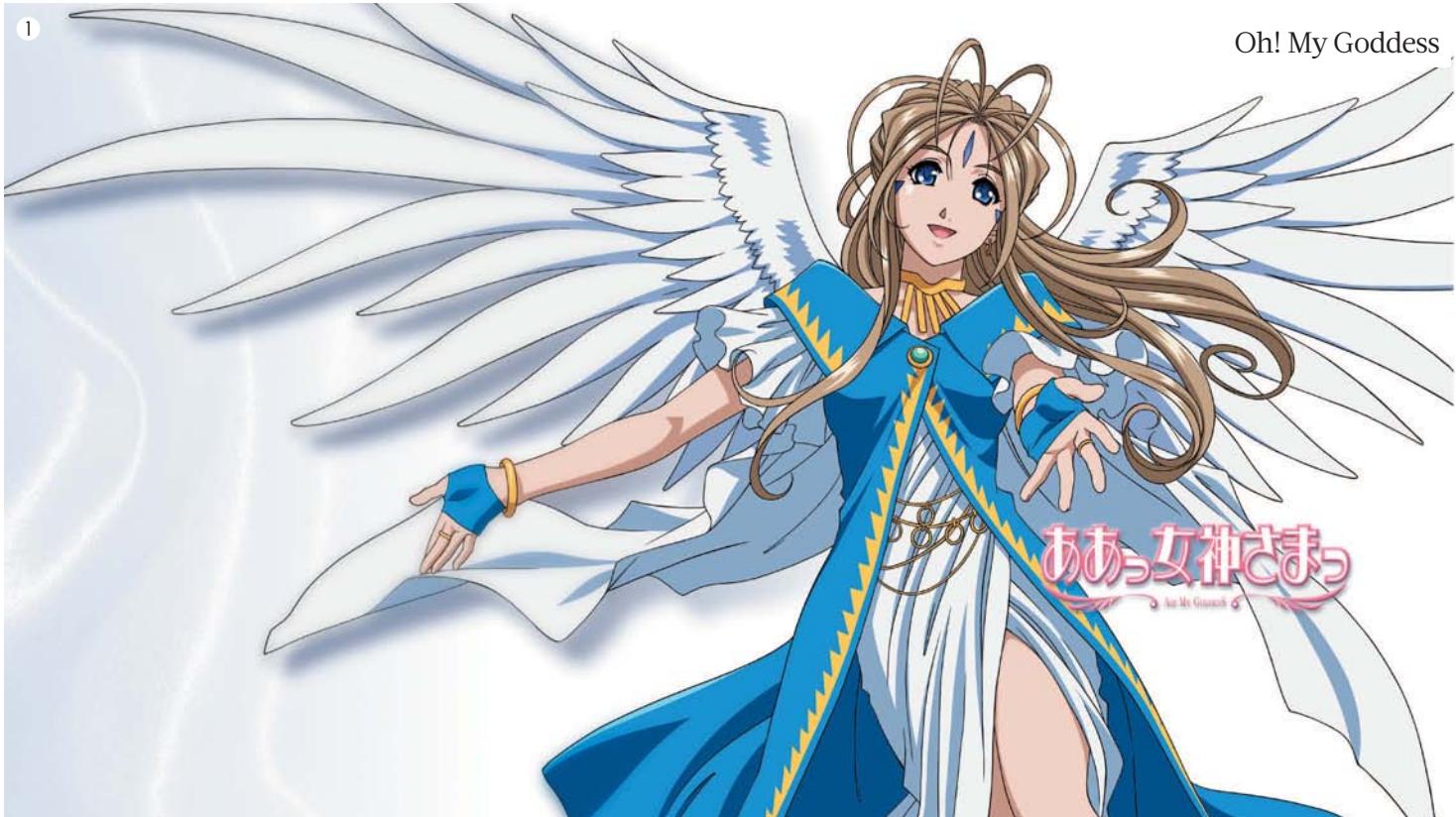
While the Tokugawa Dynasty was overthrown during the Meiji Restoration, its legacy lives on in modern Japan which maintains a deeply entrenched conservatism. This is not a country quick to embrace change. Democracy and universal suffrage were introduced during the US led occupation after World War II, but Japanese politics has been gripped by inertia almost since its inception. The LDP – Liberal Democratic Party – was formed from the merger of the Japan Democratic Party and the Liberal Party in 1955. It has governed Japan almost continuously since then, with the only exceptions being two brief periods out of office – 1993 to 1994 and 2009 to 2012, a grand total of six years out of the last 63. The near unbroken rule of the LDP is indicative of Japan's resistance to change, a mindset that encompasses the role of women.

Japan is one of the largest economies in the world, depending on which measurement is used, but it struggles with equality in the workplace. A survey by Kyodo News in 2016 revealed that women account for roughly 40% of workers in the private sector, but only 9% of managerial positions. And the figure is even lower in government roles.

Many women leave employment when they have children as companies are notoriously hostile to maternity leave, while the macho culture of working late and drinking sessions after hours is hardly compatible with balancing a career and raising a family. Many young Japanese have given up on the idea of marriage and the country's declining birth-rate is a major headache for government as it means an aging population and falling GDP. It's not an environment where young women are encouraged to chase their dream job.

Even the idol industry where young girls can find fame and perhaps fortune is marketed towards men, particularly middle-aged men with plenty of disposable income. Meanwhile the idols themselves must know that any success comes with a Sell By date and that they will inevitably be replaced by someone younger. In the creative industries, many of Japan's most talented >>>





Oh! My Goddess

1. You'll never be as lovely and gentle and beautiful as Belldandy, so don't even try. 2. Lum Invader, or Ms. Invader to you... 3. Animal print is all the rage amongst space invaders. Add some to your A/W wardrobe and enjoy! 4. If you don't like *Sailor Moon*, you can't be friends with us.

>>> women end up emigrating. Jazz pianists Hiromi Uehara and Chihiro Yamanaka both moved to the United States, while classical pianist Michiko Uchida lives in the UK.

WARRIORS AND WIVES

Against this backdrop, the magical girl can offer a wonderful escapist fantasy of fun, adventure and romance. Go Nagai's *Cutie Honey*, introduced in 1973, was aimed at a male audience, but it helped popularise one of the magical girl archetypes – the magical girl warrior. Honey Kisaragi is an android who transforms into the superhero Cutie Honey to fight against the evil Panther Claw organisation. The series displayed Go's often racy sense of humour and was never shy about fanservice, but the idea that a girl could be an action heroine was an important development which helped pave the way for later magical girl adventure shows like *Sailor Moon*.

The 1970s gave the world another long-running shonen series with a magical girl at its heart in the form of Rumiko Takahashi's *Urusei Yatsura*. Lum Invader is the beautiful and scantily clad

alien girl who competes in a game of tag against a human teenage boy called Ataru for the fate of planet Earth. When Ataru wins and shouts out that now he can get married – his girlfriend Shinobu promised to wed him if he triumphed – Lum takes this as a proposal aimed at her and promptly accepts.

Despite her beauty and the fact that she has a range of fantastic abilities, including delivering electric shocks, Lum has to endure Ataru's hostility. He makes her sleep in a closet and she is bound to him despite his desire to pursue other girls. Lum can be seen as an expression of the limits that Japanese society imposes on young women. She is expected to cook, clean, and generally cater for the needs of her 'husband', all the while being young and beautiful and yet having little life of her own outside of the role of wife. As far as wish fulfilment goes, Lum is definitely the embodiment of a male fantasy, not a female one.

Naoko Takeuchi's *Sailor Moon* ranks as one of the most popular and successful manga creations of all time, a shoujo title to rival shonen champions like *Dragon Ball* and *One Piece*. Unlike Lum Invader, the heroine of this series is far less defined

CRACKING UP

Satoshi Kon's *Perfect Blue* is a psychological thriller about an idol, called Mima Kirigoe, who quits her pop trio and decides to become an actress. But she finds herself on the edge of a nervous breakdown from dealing with a stalker. Definitely not one for the kids in the audience.

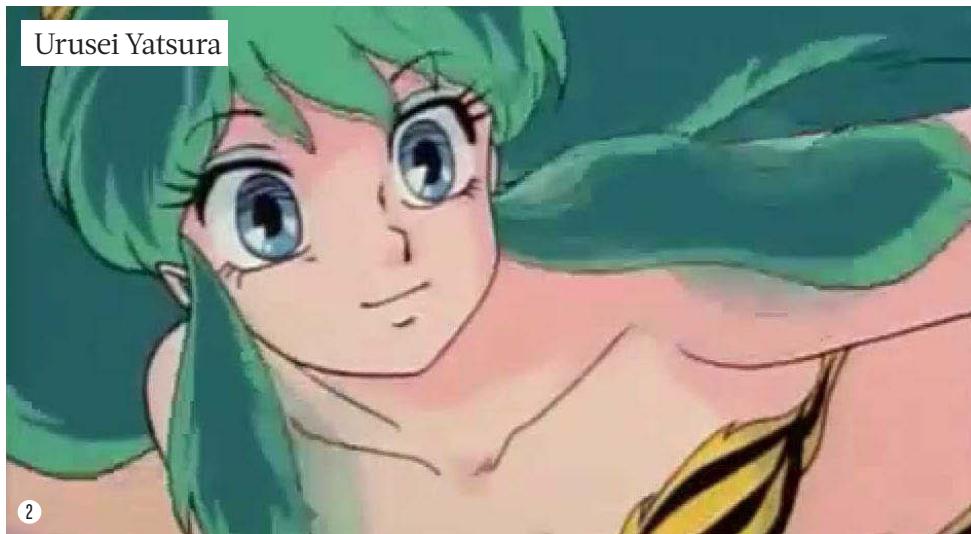




Cardcaptor Sakura



Cardcaptor Sakura



2



Oh! My Goddess

"THE MAGICAL GIRL IS ONE OF THE MOST RECOGNIZABLE ARCHETYPES IN ANIME. THE ORIGINAL MAGICAL GIRL WAS SALLY THE WITCH, WHO DEBUTED IN 1966."

by her relationship with a male character. Usagi Tsukino is the teenage star of the tale who, upon rescuing a talking cat called Luna, is given the power to transform into the magical girl warrior Sailor Moon. With her squad of magical girls, Sailor Moon fights the forces of the Dark Kingdom and has a romance with the dashing Tuxedo Mask. The relationship between the pair is a major series plot thread, but its importance doesn't diminish the fact that Usagi is the protagonist of *Sailor Moon*, not Tuxedo Mask, and this is her adventure. He's basically her sidekick as well as her boyfriend, which is a pretty bold move. Debuting in the pages of *Nakayoshi* magazine, *Sailor Moon* was squarely aimed at female fans, unlike both *Cutie Honey* and *Urusei Yatsura*, proving that an adventure series for girls could be a hit.

However, it didn't manage to kill off the concept of the

magical girl as a male fantasy figure. Kosuke Fujishima's *Oh! My Goddess* sees college student Keiichi Morisato accidentally wind up living with the beautiful and doting goddess Belldandy – plus her sisters Urd and Skuld. It's a gorgeous series to look at – although none of the anime adaptations capture the exquisite detail of Fujishima's manga artwork – but Belldandy is the epitome of the subservient Japanese girlfriend / wife. She's a housekeeper, cook, caregiver, highly attractive yet virginally pure, and with no apparent desires of her own but to please Keiichi. Faced with these sorts of expectations, no wonder so many young Japanese women prefer a single life.

Cardcaptor Sakura may rival *Sailor Moon* for name recognition in the west. Created by the manga collective CLAMP, Sakura is young for a magical girl heroine, only ten years old,



Oh! My Goddess



Sailor Moon

TOKYO GIRLS

Kyoko Miyake's documentary *Tokyo Girls*, produced by the BBC's *Storyville* series, looks at the strange, obsessive relationship between idols and their middle-aged male fandom. Miyake analyses how the idol industry has commodified these men's need for emotional connection and the fact that the girls must appear simultaneously childlike and sexualised.



All images this spread:
Battle Girl High School

RISING INEQUALITY

In 2017, the World Economic Forum ranked Japan 114th on a global scale of countries by gender equality, a fall of three places. The drop was partly due to the low numbers of Japanese women in ministerial and policy making roles, and the continuing lack of equality in the workplace.

"THE EARTH MAY BE IN NEAR CONSTANT DANGER, BUT THERE'S STILL TIME FOR FRIENDSHIP, FOR SCHOOL FESTIVALS, A TRIP TO THE BEACH, PUTTING ON A CONCERT, AND FIGHTING ALIENS."

>>> where most magical girls are teenagers, but the series was intended to appeal to younger fans. After she unintentionally lets a collection of powerful magic cards loose, Sakura is charged with the task of recovering them, aided by some new magical abilities. The show is fun and light-hearted, but a strange thing happened in the new millennium when the magical girl took an unexpected turn towards much darker territory.

On the surface, with its kawaii cast and bright costumes, *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* looks like another standard magical girl series in which the adorable heroines must fight against evil witches. But then the viewer discovers that the witches were all once magical girls and that their powers are a curse, not a

blessing. The critical and commercial success of the show led to a new sub-genre of dark magical girl series, including *Magical Girl Raising Project*, in which the solution to an overabundance of magical girls is to have them take each other out in mortal combat, or *Day Break Illusion* in which the heroine discovers that the only way to rid the world of demons is to kill the humans they possess. So that's cheery, but it proves how malleable the magical girl concept can be to appeal to different demographics.

SOMEONE FOR EVERYONE

Battle Girl High School is not a series to feed on the darkness or whisper terrifying threats from the shadows. It features an





uncommonly large cast – there are 19 Hoshimori girls to keep track of – most of whom are defined by a dominant personality trait. There's the plucky one, the shy one, the smart one, the take charge one, the silly one, the one who has a crush on all the other girls (the show never uses the word lesbian, that would be crossing a line!), and so on. Two of the Hoshimori girls, Shiho and Kanon, have to balance their Earth-defending duties with their career as pop stars in the idol duo Fortissimo. How the pop music industry survived the invasion of the planet is anybody's guess. But that's what the show offers its fans – pure escapism.

Where modern Japanese women and girls face difficult choices between family or work, and the enormous pressure to conform, the multi-coloured heroines of *Battle Girl High School* represent the ideal of having it all. Shiho and Kanon don't have to choose between their life as idols and saving the planet, they can do both. The Earth may be in near constant danger, but there's still time for friendship, for school festivals, a trip to the beach, putting on a concert, and fighting aliens. The anime is based on a game and it shows how much the magical girl concept has been refined and, arguably,

homogenised. There are enough girls in the character roster to appeal to whatever particular personality type a viewer finds most appealing and, at heart, the anime is more about the importance of friendship and teamwork than it is about smashing aliens in the face with high tech weaponry. That conservatism mentioned earlier comes to the surface here. Their supervisor is a man, and although the girls may have a whine when a fun activity is interrupted by an Irous attack, there's never a suggestion that they might seriously disobey orders or question their mission, unlike edgier series such as *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* where the bright, beautiful façade of the magical girl's life is rudely ripped away.

Where *Sally The Witch* and *Sailor Moon* were clearly targeted at a shoujo audience, *Battle Girl High School* seems to be casting the widest net possible. It's cute and sweet with pop songs for the shoujo crowd, but there's action and idols for the shonen audience, and with 19 girls in the line-up, the otaku marketing and merchandising possibilities are there begging to be exploited. Magical girls are clearly here to stay.

Battle Girl High School is on Blu-ray 1 October from MVM. ●



5. This isn't even the whole squad. There are a lot of Hoshimori girls to remember!

6. In case you couldn't tell, Hasumi is the cheeky, playful one in the group. Her superpower is sassiness. **7.** Holy moly, it's the Powerpuff Girls! **8.** Remember: guns don't kill Irous. Girls with guns kill Irous. **9.** Pity the foolish alien invader who forces Miki to miss a Fortissimo concert! **10.** The character designs are by two people, Hideki Furukawa and Shuhei Yamamoto, but they only seem to know how to draw one face.



NEW FROM BANDAI NAMCO!

No IP Left Behind

THIS MONTH, BANDAI Namco revealed their upcoming roster of games, titillating our taste buds with hotly anticipated and soon-to-be-released titles, and teasing us with new details on franchises further down the line. On the menu in upcoming months are fighting games including *Jump Force*, *My Hero One's Justice* and *Soul Calibur VI*, with a taste of nature in *One Piece: World Seeker*.

SoulCalibur VI is the game that you can get in your hands soonest, releasing on 19 October, and it's the first mainline entry in the series since 2012. Fan-favourites such as Ivy Valentine, Kilik and Nightmare return, alongside *The Witcher*'s Geralt, who fits into the game perfectly. As far as guest characters go, playtesting reveals he feels the most at home. The game looks better than ever and feels just as good, so there's plenty to look forward for PS4, Xbox One and PC owners.

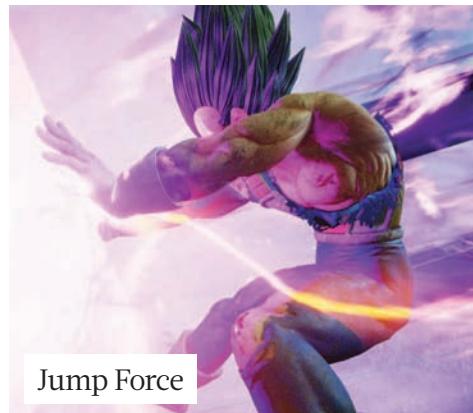
My Hero's One Justice releases just one week later on 26 October, and those expecting it to be a *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm* clone will be pleased to know that it feels very different. It's weightier, each character feels wholly different, and there's plenty of depth, although the inputs are accessible enough so that newcomers can play it. Destructible arenas, most of the anime's notable heroes and heroines, and tight controls come together to create an experience that any *My Hero Academia* fan shouldn't miss out on. It's hitting all current platforms too, including PS4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch and PC.

Jump Force is the last of the big three fighting games that Bandai Namco is working on right now, and it's another attempt at bringing together a

bunch of Shonen Jump franchises to create a wonderful, fan-service-fuelled experience with something for everyone. It is very simple – almost a tad too simple – but there isn't a whole lot to get hands-on with just yet, and it's still quite far from its 2019 release window. It looks gorgeous though, and real-world locations Hong Kong and New York are beautiful. *Jump Force* is a step forward from *V-Stars Victory*, and its 3v3 gameplay delivers on blistering fast, bombastic battles, just as you'd expect them to. It's very cinematic too, capturing the grand scale and power of each character's iconic moves, such as *Dragon Ball Z*'s Vegeta and his devastating Final Flash. Skipping the Nintendo Switch, *Jump Force* is releasing on PS4, Xbox One and PC.

One Piece: World Seeker currently has an incredibly short demo, and little opportunity to explore the open-world. Instead, Bandai Namco's play-test allows journoes to experience a brief segment where you fight various enemies on your way up a mountain-like hill, ending with a boss battle before you're taken back to the main menu. There are plenty of options for Luffy, and many of his unique skills are present, but the controls didn't feel too intuitive, and the world doesn't seem as if it's brimming with life. Hopefully the full release will better capture the rich world of *One Piece*, and Bandai Namco will give it the time it needs, as this is a big step for the franchise. It's a game that has the potential to give fans a *One Piece* experience that resembles the thrill-seeking adventures of the anime, and it will be releasing on PS4, Xbox One and PC.

Bandai Namco are showing no signs of slowing down, and they're rolling with this momentum into 2019! Stay tuned for more! ●



//COMING UP PROJECT A & PROJECT A PART II

OUT: 29 OCTOBER // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA ENTERTAINMENT

In 1983, Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao kicked the kung fu movie out of the Qing Dynasty and into the twentieth century with *Project A*. It's a rip-roaring adventure about the tussle between the Royal Hong Kong Coastguard and the pirates terrorising the South China Sea that blends slapstick, outrageously dangerous stunts, and brilliant fight scenes that revolutionised Hong Kong action cinema. Now it's coming to Blu-ray in a double bill with Chan's 1987 sequel from Eureka Entertainment.



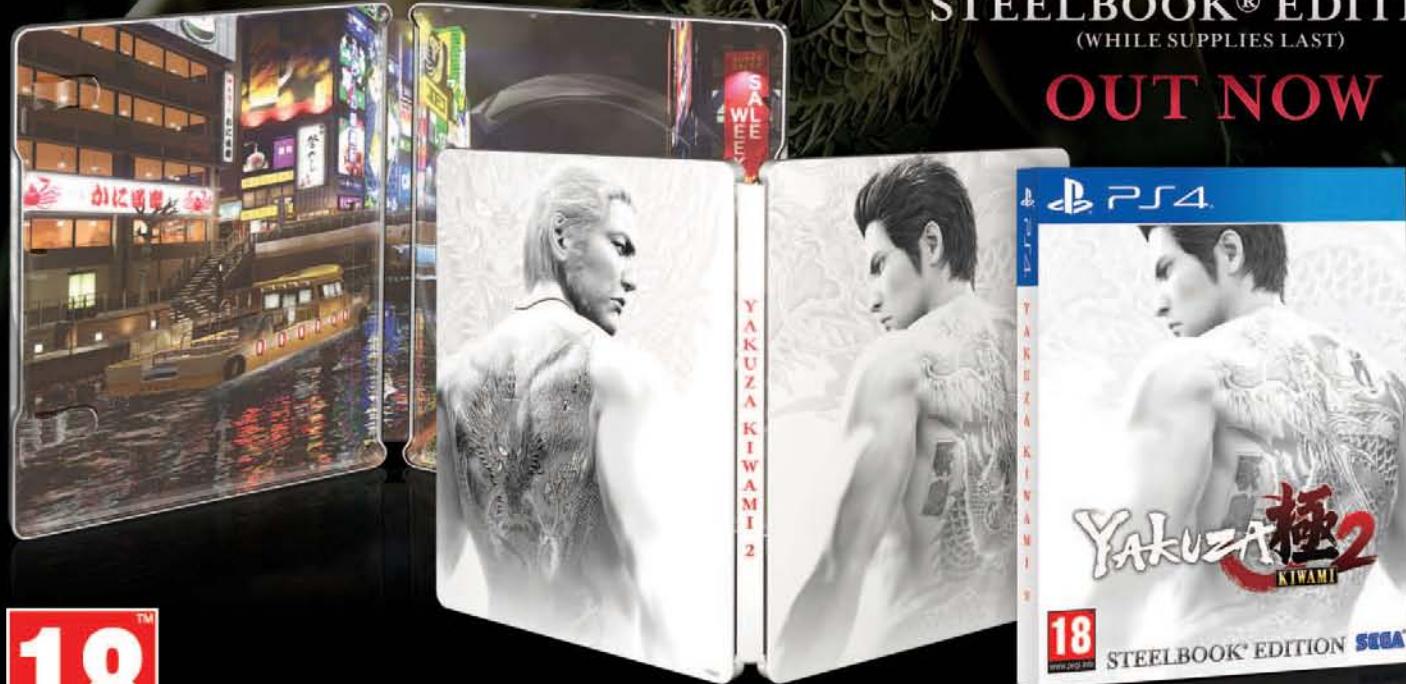


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NEO'S TOP TEN

Our roundup of the hottest tracks currently blasting on the office stereo

WORDS BY TOM SMITH

1 SPYAIR – I WANNA BE... 21 OCTOBER

Nagoya's finest are coming to the UK at last! After more than 13 years, seven mega successful albums, and more than ten anime and video game theme songs under their belts, SPYAIR are about to embark on their very first world tour this October.

The UK leg of the tour has been booked in at The Underworld in Camden, London on 21 October. Tickets are on sale now priced at £23, with a VIP upgrade available for an extra £50 which will get you early entry, a laminate, and a group photo with the band and other fans.

Latest single *I Wanna Be...* is out now digitally and sees the foursome return to the *Gintama* franchise for its latest opening song. A limited version of the single has been released in Japan with special *Gintama* packaging and including all six tracks SPYAIR have had in the series.

If it's anime themes you're into, check out SPYAIR's *BEST* album, out in the UK on CD via JPU Records. It packs in their tracks from *Bleach*, *Gintama*, *Gundam* and more and includes their most viewed song on YouTube, *Imagination*, which has racked up over 31 million views. Latest album *Kingdom* has their big hit *RAGE OF DUST* from the most recent *Gundam* outing, as well as *MIDNIGHT*, a jazzy track that introduces a funky piano chorus to the usual high-energy pop-rock sound.

LONDON SHOW!



UK SPECIAL ALBUM!



2 PASSCODE – MISS UNLIMITED 5 OCTOBER

The idol hybrid known as PassCode is about to release their first CD overseas courtesy of JPU Records. Entitled *Ex Libris PassCode*, the release will be an exclusive compilation of tracks spanning the group's career so far, including their classic *NINJA BOMBER* that's been entirely re-recorded especially for the release. It also features a special 20-page booklet containing never before seen images of PassCode and lyric transliterations and translations included for all tracks.

PassCode mix elements of idol culture with heavy rock and electronic music. Similar to BABYMETAL the group has a band incorporated in their live performances (the drummer of which is also a member of J-rockers My First Story!, the band fronted by Taka from One Ok Rock's brother) and has the girls sing, dance, headbang and scream in front.

The group has a number of music videos on their YouTube channel, as well as footage of their exciting live shows. We expect this to be their first step in a great career outside of Japan. We saw them live in Tower Records in Shinjuku a few years ago, and there was almost a full-blown riot as fans turned the shop into a giant moshpit.

LONDON DATE!



3 BAND-MAID – START AGAIN 17 NOVEMBER

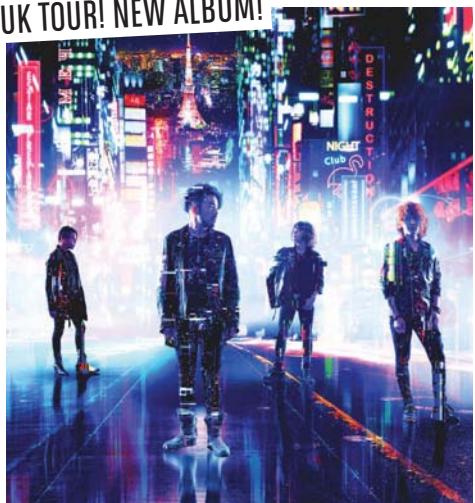
The guitar wielding maid squad are back, this time taking the title of their latest album *WORLD DOMINATION* literally by booking a proper world tour! The news broke just days after the release of latest single *Start Over*, which sees the band take on a completely different sound to that found on their last record. Does the title mean they're starting again and changing their style? Or perhaps someone told them that their last *WORLD DOMINATION* tour forgot to include any dates in the world besides Japan, so it's time to hit the drawing board again? Whatever the meaning, the new song's video smashed over half a million views within days of being uploaded to YouTube.

The Dome in Tufnell Park, London, will host their only UK date of this tour. Tickets have yet to be announced, but we expect the usual VIP malarkey to be available. Follow jpurecords.com for all the updates.

UK TOUR! NEW SINGLE!



UK TOUR! NEW ALBUM!



UK TOUR!



8 COLDRAIN – FEED THE FIRE 18-30 SEPTEMBER!

coldrain, a Japanese rock band who have been creating waves overseas and played a number of European and UK festivals, will conduct one of their biggest UK tours this September as support for Crown The Empire.

Tickets are on sale now and the tour hits shows in cities across the United Kingdom, including Brighton, Southampton, Bristol, London, Birmingham, Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow, Newcastle, Manchester and Norwich.

4

CRYSTAL LAKE – THE CIRCLE 11-15 DECEMBER

New season, new tour! Tokyo's leading metalcore heroes just finished a most triumphant European tour, playing to thousands of metal fans across the continent at various festivals and headline club dates. Now they're back with a new tour, including five dates across England and Scotland.

They'll be joining Bury Tomorrow, 36 Crazyfists and Cane Hill in Bristol, Birmingham, Glasgow, Manchester and London for a tour that is guaranteed to be absolute mayhem. Tickets are priced at a mere £16 plus fees – an absolute steal. Latest single *THE CIRCLE* also features Masato from coldrain (also on tour here soon), give it a listen!

6

CROSSFAITH – CATASTROPHE 13-21 OCTOBER

Get ready to have your ears blasted, eyes dazzled, and body covered in other people's sweat; electro-metal monsters Crossfaith are back and they're coming to a venue near you this October. The new tour sees them with dates booked in Bristol, Glasgow, Nottingham, London, Sheffield and Dublin from 13 October, and follows the release of their latest album *EX_MACHINA*, out now in the UK on CD and digital download / streaming courtesy of label UNFD. *Catastrophe* is one of the latest singles to be released from the album and is available to listen on YouTube, along with the rest of their videos.

9

MIKU HATSUNE – WORLD IS MINE 8 DECEMBER

Japan's leek-spinning digital pop phenomenon Miku Hatsune is heading to the UK for her first proper concert at the end of this year – and we can't wait! The icon is the figurehead of the Vocaloid movement, a genre of music composed digitally using synthetic vocal software. The show, entitled MIKU EXPO, will be heading to Olympia in London on 8 December. Tickets on sale now and selling fast.

UK DATE!



5

B.T.S. – DNA 9, 10 OCTOBER

Not long to go until Korean pop sensations B.T.S. make their mark on the UK. The mega successful boyband have already sold out London's O2 Arena – TWICE – within minutes of tickets going on sale a few months back. No further dates have been added to the UK, despite the huge demand, so expect any remaining tickets to sky rocket in price on eBay and similar services.

Last year the group sold out 40 concerts in 19 cities. This time around they'll be performing in 11 cities across Europe, North America and Asia and promoting their third studio album *LOVE YOURSELF*. In celebration of the news, HMV in Oxford Street have brought in their own BTS section, with a selection of the group's CDs.

7

TRICOT – POTAGE 11-18 NOVEMBER

We're going to be a bit cheeky here and sneak in two pieces of music news in this entry; the math-rock band tricot are not only back in the UK on tour, they're also co-headlining a festival with fellow Japanese mathemusicians (is that a word?) LITE. The former heading up fest ENJOY Sugoi in London on 18 November, and the latter performing on the previous day. Both are great and worth checking out! tricot have headline dates booked in Brighton, Nottingham, Glasgow and Manchester before they play their only London date at ENJOY Sugoi. It looks sugoi, we will enjoy.

NEW ALBUM!



10

SUMIRE UESAKA – NO FUTURE VACANCES OUT NOW

The first overseas album from the POP TEAM EPIC singer is out now in the UK courtesy of JPU Records. The release, which includes transliterated lyrics in its booklet so fans can sing along, includes a number of quirky fun J-pop songs from anime, including themes from *This Art Club Has a Problem!*, *Hazuki's Coolheadedness*, and *Aho-Girl*, as well as her biggest hit so far; *POP TEAM EPIC*.

YET ANOTHER CORNER

JONATHAN CLEMENTS ON THE TROUBLE WITH FIDDLING

The director Sunao Katabuchi has just announced that he will be re-releasing his Hiroshima film *In This Corner of the World* with half an hour of bonus footage, interleaving other scenes from the original manga. I am rather surprised that everybody appears to be pleased about this, and not kvetching that they have already paid to see the film once, and now will have to pay to see it again, at a bum-numbing 159 minutes.

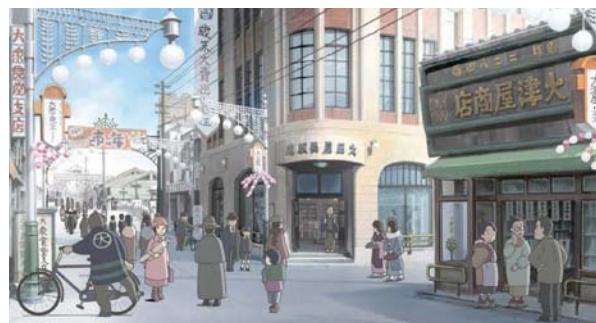
In This Corner is arguably a special case, since it was crowd-funded from the start, and its director might, presumably, genuinely have other bits he wants to tinker with. Art is never finished, as they say, only abandoned, and it's easy to see why creatives given the chance to fiddle with their work will jump at the chance to improve it. One of anime's worst-kept secrets, after all, is the number of releases that are buffed up after their hasty cinema release or TV broadcast, toshched up a little before anyone gets the chance to spot mistakes and fudges on home media.

But I'd like to register a possibly lone protest about the ongoing fetish for "director's cuts" that, far from honing a work of art a little bit closer to perfection, simply hang adornments on it in a cynical attempt to fleece customers of more money.

"I'D LIKE TO REGISTER A POSSIBLY LONE PROTEST ABOUT THE ONGOING FETISH FOR "DIRECTOR'S CUTS" THAT, FAR FROM HONING A WORK OF ART A LITTLE BIT CLOSER TO PERFECTION, SIMPLY HANG ADORNMENTS ON IT IN A CYNICAL ATTEMPT TO FLEECE CUSTOMERS OF MORE MONEY."

Culturally, there seems to be a fetish in Japan for making films as long as possible so that everyone feels that they are getting their money's worth. I used to think this was a hold-over from the pre-video days when TV serials were re-cut for cinema release, whereby producers felt that if they couldn't show you anything new, they could at least give you a *long* film. But such economies simply don't work in the world of original anime, where every frame you see has to be painstakingly created from scratch. Whisper it, then: sometimes this is really counter-productive.

As a case in point, *Cowboy Bebop: The Movie*, for which the film-makers actually boasted in their publicity that



1. How many extra scenes will be tacked onto the running time of *In This Corner*? 2. Will fiddling improve the finished dish, or render it over-seasoned...?!

they had taken a taut, lean 90-minute thriller and bloated it with half an hour or unnecessary filler. Sometimes less, really is more, and I am baffled by creatives' willingness to test the patience of audience. Sometimes I wonder if some film-makers are really making films for human beings at all, and instead have an eye on appeasing a robot at a streaming service, that only counts minutes accessed, rather than stories told. ●

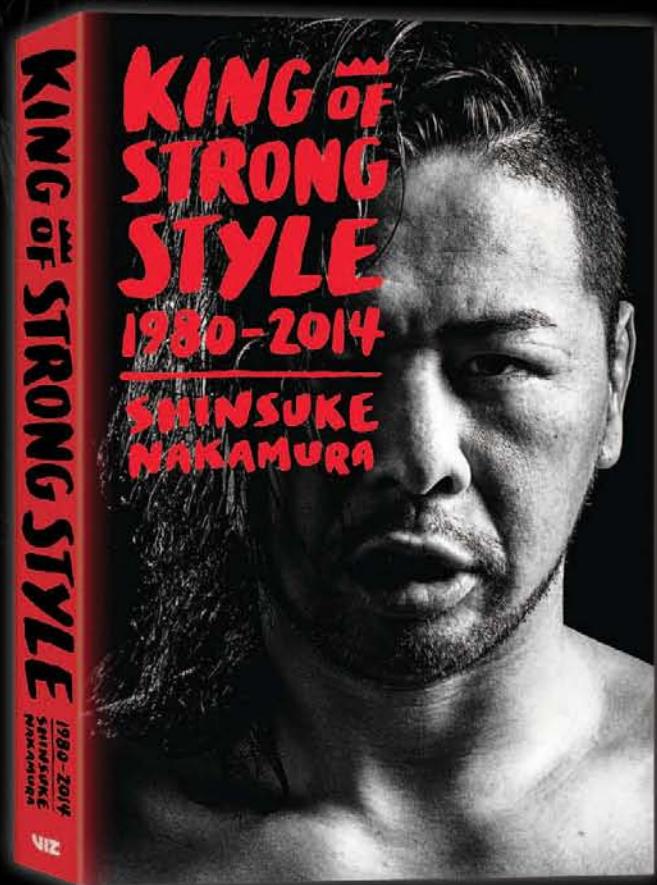
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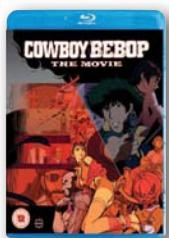
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YEAH OH!

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UK release schedule



ANIME

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
24/09	Asterisk War Part 1 [DVD, Blu-ray]	MVM
24/09	When They Cry Series 1 Collection [DVD]	MVM
24/09	Kiznaiver [DVD, Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
24/09	Sound! Euphonium Season 1 [Collector's Blu-ray, DVD]	Anime Limited
24/09	Angelic Layer Collector's Edition [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
24/09	Digimon Tamers [DVD]	Manga
24/09	Cowboy Bebop: The Movie [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
24/09	Steamboy [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
24/09	Paprika [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
01/10	Battle Girl High School Collection [Blu-ray]	MVM
01/10	Testament of Sister New Devil Burst [Collector's Blu-ray, DVD]	Anime Limited
01/10	Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
01/10	RWBY 4 [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
01/10	RWBY 5 [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
08/10	Fate Stay Night: UBW Part 2 [Blu-ray]	MVM
08/10	Yu-Gi-Oh! The Movie [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
08/10	Yu-Gi-Oh! Triple Pack [DVD]	Manga
08/10	Dragon Ball Super Part 5 [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
15/10	K: Missing Kings [Collector's combi, DVD]	Anime Limited
15/10	Tokyo Godfathers [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
15/10	Blood Fest [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
15/10	Dragon Ball Kai: The Final Chapters Part 1 [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
15/10	Grimoire of Zero [Combi Collector's]	MVM



MANGA

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
27/09	Wake Up, Sleeping Beauty 6	Kodansha
27/09	The Seven Deadly Sins 28	Kodansha

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
27/09	Seraph of the End 4	Vertical
04/10	Again!! 5	Kodansha
04/10	Descending Stories: Showa Genroku Rakugo Shinju 9	Kodansha
04/10	The Heroic Legend Of Arslan 9	Kodansha
04/10	Wotakoi: Love is Hard for Otaku 3	Kodansha
04/10	20th Century Boys: The Perfect Edition 1	VIZ Media
04/10	Anonymous Noise 10	Shojo Beat
04/10	Children of the Whales 6	VIZ Media
04/10	Don't Be Cruel 7	Sublime
04/10	Escape Journey 1	Sublime
04/10	Golden Kamuy 6	VIZ Media
04/10	Hayate the Combat Butler 32	VIZ Media
04/10	Pokémon Sun & Moon 2	VIZ Media
04/10	Pompom Pokémon	VIZ Media
04/10	Queen's Quality 5	Shojo Beat
04/10	Radiant Vol 1	VIZ Media
04/10	The Young Master's Revenge vol 3	Shojo Beat
11/10	Battle Angel Alita: Holy Night and Other Stories	Kodansha
11/10	Love And Lies 8	Kodansha
11/10	To Your Eternity 7	Kodansha
11/10	Tokyo Tarareba Girls 3	Kodansha
11/10	AJIN: DEMI-HUMAN 12	Vertical
11/10	APOSIMZ 1	Vertical
18/10	Cells at Work! 6	Kodansha
18/10	Attack On Titan Season 3 Manga Box Set	Kodansha
18/10	Fire Force 12	Kodansha
18/10	Bleach 3-in-1 Edition 24	Shonen Jump
18/10	Bleach Box Set Vol 3 [vols 49-74]	Shonen Jump
18/10	Blue Exorcist 20	VM Shonen Jump Advanced
18/10	Food Wars 26	VM Shonen Jump Advanced
18/10	Frankenstein: Junji Ito Story Collection	VIZ Media
18/10	Haikyu!! 28	Shonen Jump
18/10	Juni Taisen: Zodiac War 1	Shonen Jump
18/10	Kuroko's Basketball 2-in-1 Edition 14	Shonen Jump



ASIAN FILM

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
24/09	City Hunter	Eureka
24/09	A Prayer Before Dawn	Altitude Film Entertainment
24/09	Ciao Ciao	Matchbox Films
01/10	Blind Fury	Mediumrare
29/10	Jackie Chan's Project A & Project A Part 2	Eureka
29/10	Operation Red Sea	Cine Asia
09/11	Of Love & Law	Hakawati
19/11	Zatoichi The Blind Swordsman Criterion Collection	Sony Pictures
23/11	Shoplifters	Thunderbird Releasing
26/11	Once Upon A Time In China Trilogy	Eureka
26/12	Alita: Battle Angel	20th Century Fox
01/01	Spider Lillies	Parasol Pictures
01/02	Burning	Thunderbird Releasing



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WORDS BY DAVID WEST



ONCE UPON A TIME...

Tsui Hark Reinvents The Legend

IN THE LATTER half of the 1980s, Hong Kong cinema was dominated by gangster films, the girls with guns genre, and hopping vampires. Then in 1991 Tsui Hark changed all that with the smash success of *Once Upon A Time In China*. Set in the 19th century, the film brought back to the screen the semi-mythical figure of Wong Fei-Hung, the folk hero immortalised in Hu Peng's film series of the 1950s. Stepping into the lead role was Jet Li, whose career at that point had stalled after 1989's pot boiler *Dragon Fight*, but Li's poise and charisma proved perfect for Wong Fei-Hung.

Tsui's film spawned five sequels, three of them starring Li, and all four of those movies are included in the forthcoming Blu-ray boxset from Eureka Entertainment. *Once Upon A Time In China II* features Donnie Yen as the bad guy in one of his most popular performances and his lightning fast pole duel with Li is a classic. The third film made a star of stuntman Xiong Xin Xin, who plays kung fu brawler Clubfoot Seven, while in *Once Upon A Time In China And America*, directed by Sammo Hung, Wong Fei-Hung heads to the Wild West. The series was so successful it spawned numerous knock-offs, including *Last Hero In China* starring Li, and made it compulsory for martial arts films to include high-flying wirework. The boxset comes out on 26 November, marking the first time these films have been available on Blu-ray here in the UK.



OF LOVE & LAW

Shaking Up The Status Quo

Hikaru Toda's documentary *Of Love & Law* addresses a host of issues usually brushed under the carpet in Japan. Fumi and Kazu run a law firm in Osaka and, in a country where LGBT rights are non-existent, the two lawyers are openly gay. Their clients are no less non-conformist, including the artist Rokudenashiko, twice arrested under obscenity laws for her artwork about female sexuality, a teacher fired for not singing the national anthem, and people struggling for any sort of official recognition from the state simply because they were born outside of the traditional family structure. In a country that remains deeply conservative, Toda's film shines a light on the brave individuals who dare to resist the overwhelming pressure to stay quiet and conform. *Of Love & Law* opens in select cinemas on 9 November.



FIVE FINGER DISCOUNT

Kore'eda Steals The Palme D'Or

In May, Hirokazu Kore'eda's drama *Shoplifters* became the first Japanese film to win the prestigious Palme D'Or prize at the Cannes Film Festival since Shohei Imamura's *The Eel* back in 1997. Following his courtroom thriller *The Third Murder*, *Shoplifters* sees the director return to his favourite subject – an unconventional family. The story follows the Shibata family, who live in such poverty that they have to resort to shoplifting to survive. Despite the struggle to make ends meet, when they encounter a little girl who shows signs of being abused, they take her in. The movie topped the Japanese box office in June, becoming Kore'eda's biggest commercial success, and will be released in British cinemas on 23 November from Thunderbird Releasing.



YURI!!! ON ICE MELTS IDOL'S HEART

NEO'S RESIDENT J-POP STAR VISITS A SPECIAL THEMED MUSEUM

HELLO! I'M MAHIRU Kurumizawa and I'm a *Yuri!!! on Ice*-aholic! I watched every episode in one sitting and fell in love with Victor. Recently I visited Jimbocho in Tokyo and decided to pay the *Yuri!!! on Ice* museum a visit. Here you'll find Yuri's uniform reproduced perfectly by the sports brand Mizuno, so of course I took some pictures! At the museum you can even sit next to Yuri, so I took a selfie with him. I felt embarrassed, but I also felt like Yuri was by my side.

As well as participating in otaku activities, I've also been busy with my job; being an idol! Recently the group I'm part of, Moso Calibration, performed at the Tokyo Idol Festival in Odaiba.

This event started in 2010 and attracts over 30,000 fans. It's the who's who of the idol world! If you're an idol, you'll be on the TIF stage. This year's festival was the first time we had our own private green room waiting for us! We were headliner this time and we had stage outfit designs by our member Iori Amamiya. It was amazing!! The place was packed and I felt like summer had finally arrived.

Keep in touch with me on Instagram (@mahiru104) and Twitter (@lunch_mahiru) - I use English on my Instagram!

For more *Yuri!!! on Ice* coverage this issue, turn to our feature on page 044 and our review on page 071! ●



WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

Check out NEO's pick of the coolest merchandise around this month



1. 1/100 MG RX-0 UNICORN GUNDAM

This amazing kit allows you to build the Unicorn Gundam in either the Red Frame or Green Frame version! Available for £160 from TokyoToys.com.

2. GENKI GEAR BADGES

Nab yourselves some new badges from GenkiGear.com! Three new sets of three badges have been launched, priced £1.50 for a pack!

3. CARDFIGHT!! VANGUARD BOOSTER PACK VOL. 02

Out on 19 October, this second booster pack, subtitled Strongest! Team AL4, is priced £3.99 and includes the four clans used by Asteroid's strongest team members, Team AL4! Available from your local friendly game shop: <http://findyourgamestore.co.uk>.

4. MATCHA GREEN TEA

Buy it for the health benefits... buy it for the taste... buy it as an ingredient for baking or cooking! No matter why you drink matcha, Teapigs sell some of the finest. Priced from £20 at www.teapigs.co.uk.

5. MY HERO ACADEMIA PLUSH

Officially licensed merch from one of the hottest shows around? Yes please! Available for £17 from TokyoToys.com.





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WORDS BY EMILY VALENTINE

DEADLIFT LOLITA

When Metal Meets Kawaii... and Wrestling

TAKE ONE CROSS-DRESSING Australian guy and one pint sized Japanese lady. Throw in some power-lifting, a dash of heavy metal and a large dose of kawaii. Then turn up the energy to 11. The result? A large serving of Deadlift Lolita.

Pro-wrestling idol sensations Ladybeard and Reika Saiki have already gained a cult following since joining forces in 2017 to form Deadlift Lolita, and have succeeded in winning over metal-heads and Japanese pop fans alike.

Inhabiting the relatively new genre of 'kawaiicore', this is a band which fuses all the power of heavy metal with cutesy, catchy Japanese pop melodies. And then there's the wrestling... If you're lucky enough to see Deadlift Lolita perform live, you'll be treated to an experience like no other. With songs like *Six Pack Twins* and *Muscle Cocktail*, the super-strong team of two sing the praises of being fit and healthy, so if you happen to be inspired to hit the gym after seeing them do their thing on stage, then all the better! We caught up with the Ladybeard half of the Deadlift Lolita duo get the lowdown on all things DLL.

NEO: Firstly.... introduce us to Deadlift Lolita.

Ladybeard: Deadlift Lolita is a Kawaiicore (J-pop / metal cross over) duo consisting of cross-dressing Australian idol and pro-wrestler Ladybeard, and Japanese bodybuilding idol and pro-wrestler Reika Saiki. It's our mission to get the world pumped up with kawaii energy, and make you SWEAT!

How would you describe a Deadlift Lolita performance to someone who's never seen you perform?

Well, imagine a tall, hairy Australian wearing a bikini, screaming and dancing alongside a short Japanese female bodybuilder, also wearing a bikini, singing and dancing. Then let your imagination run wild from there!

"OUR PROUDEST MOMENTS ARE WHEN FANS TELL US THAT THEY'VE STARTED / RESTARTED EXERCISING BECAUSE THEY WERE INSPIRED BY US, AND ARE IN THE PROCESS OF BUILDING A HEALTHIER, MORE KAWAII LIFE. THIS BRINGS JOY TO OUR HEARTS!"

How did you both first meet and develop the idea for Deadlift Lolita?

We were both in Tokyo pursuing our individual careers in late 2016. Reika came to the attention of Ladybeard and DLL producer Naoko Tachibana, when her first image DVD became popular in Japan. Since both artists are simultaneously cute and strong, and found themselves wrestling in the same Japanese Pro-Wrestling federation (DDT Pro), it seemed like fate to come together and make a duo.

What do you hope that your audience gets out of your performances?

A lot of smiles and positive energy. And with luck, a little extra encouragement to get back in the gym if you haven't been for a while. Our proudest moments are when fans tell us that they've started / restarted exercising because they were inspired by us, and are in the process of building a healthier, more kawaii life. This brings joy to our hearts!

The fusion of kawaii, power lifting and metal is a unique one. How do you think all these elements complement each other?

Very well! You can't be kawaii unless you have a foundation strong enough to support the exploding amazing kawaiiness! Frankly we don't understand how anyone would ever pursue kawaiiness without developing strength first. It would be like asking a dog to meow like a cat – it just wouldn't make sense!

Is your fan base as diverse as your band? How have you been received in the metal world?

Yes it's surprisingly diverse. The most beautiful thing is we open metalheads up to the kawaii side of life, and we open cuties up to the power of metal. We love exposing people to joys that they probably wouldn't go exploring on their own.

What have been the highlights of your time together so far?

Definitely the fans who have started working out because they felt inspired by us. There's something profoundly beautiful about that. The fact that we can help live better lives through our work, that's really something amazing.

What are your plans for the rest of the year... and beyond?!

World domination. Of course....

Another super-charged Deadlift Lolita anthem will be dropping in October, so keep your eyes peeled and your ears open for updates!

If you need even more kawaii-powerlifting inspo, you can follow their adventures over on the DLL Facebook page @dlolita or head to the official website at dl-lolita.com ●

ANIME EXPOSÉ

BANANA FISH

Conspiracy, crime, controversy



WE'RE COVERING TWO very different anime this month, but with something in common; they're both likely to be controversial with viewers, and especially non-Japanese ones. *Happy Pure Life*, over the page, is openly outrageous, but *Banana Fish* is the more interesting case study.

It's a heap of contradictions. *Banana Fish* is supposedly set in the present day, with mobile phones and DVDS, but it's adapted from a celebrated manga that was published in Japan more than 30 years ago. It's a crime story of gangs and mobsters, drugs and murders... and it ran in a magazine for schoolgirls. It's a gay-themed drama that's been hailed by some critics for its depiction of homosexuality... yet viewers may find it unwatchably homophobic.

Another unusual thing about *Banana Fish*, by female author Akimi Yoshida, is that it's set almost entirely in America, and largely in New York. Its central figure is Ash Lynx, an achingly handsome youth. At 17, he's one of the most powerful street gang bosses in the city. He's so magnetic he's even drawn the foreign media; a Japanese photographer has crossed the Pacific to profile him.

But it's not the photographer who becomes important to Ash, but his young assistant. Nineteen-year-old Eiji is boyish, shy and naïve, but he has steel under that. He'll need it. During his "press" meeting with Ash in a graffiti-splattered bar – *Akira* echoes! – Eiji gets caught in a violent attack involving mobsters and turncoat gangsters, uniting in a bid to take out Ash.

In what follows, Ash and Eiji end up saving each other's lives, and develop a rapport despite all their obvious differences. Soon Eiji's acting very out of "character" to help his new friend, rushing headlong into shoot-outs and chases, through NY and beyond.

This is also a conspiracy-mystery series, involving a newly-synthesised drug with lethal effects, driving its users to suicide and murder. One victim was Ash's older brother, whose last words were a nonsense-seeming phrase, "Banana Fish". As the characters themselves note, this is a phrase from a short story with a suicidal conclusion by J.D. Salinger (though Salinger wrote it as one word, "Bananafish.") Remember, the *Banana Fish* manga long predicated the Salinger-obsessed "Laughing Man" season of *Stand Alone Complex*.

GOOD FISH, BAD FISH

Let's stress the positives first. The episodes of *Banana Fish* that we've seen have been exciting, fast moving and filler-free. Ash and Eiji's slow-burn relationship makes them a great odd couple, but they're not the only good characters. An older journalist character, Max, looks amusingly beefy beside the slender youths, he provides humour, pathos and important plot info. There's a lovely little character scene where Ash critiques Max's journalism, and we see that he's demolished the older man utterly.

In the more violent scenes, the show doesn't pull punches. Many of the



"BANANA FISH IS A HEAP OF CONTRADICTIONS."



developments are true surprises; not all the goodies get away with flesh wounds. The action's very well animated by the MA PPA studio, though it lacks the glittery gloss of MA PPA's *Terror in Resonance* a few years ago. Like *Banana Fish*, *Terror* was a non-fantasy urban thriller; it's bracing to see anime taking on such cinematic material. But there were times when *Terror* was terribly silly, and did things that an audience would have laughed out of court in a live-action film.

Unfortunately, that's true of *Banana Fish* too. The second episode, for example, suffers two strikes in quick succession. First a bad guy falls for a stupidly obvious trick set by Ash, whom the baddie knows is massively dangerous. Moments later, there's a hilarious case of what's known vulgarly as Ass Pull Plotting. The escaping characters are trapped by a high wall, only for Eiji to reveal that, whaddya know, he used to be a pole vaulter.

New Yorkers may also cry foul at the depiction of their crime-ridden city. The original manga was

published between 1985 and 1994, when New York's crime was horrendous, but now it's one of America's safest cities. That said, some of the characters' exchanges on guns do feel topical; the Japanese visitors are appalled at America's gun culture, while Ash suggests it's what the country's stuck with, whatever foreigners think.

As for the gay content, this is a show that revolves round a close, compelling same-sex relationship, and yet so much of the overt homosexuality that's shown is monstrous. Ash, it turns out, has been raped and trafficked by brutish men since childhood. It's possible to defend this within the context of the story, but *Banana Fish*'s early episodes can seem obsessed with male rape, far more than *The Shawshank Redemption* or Japan's own *Berserk*.

In one scene, a character tells Eiji their captor is gay. Our Japanese hero gapes in shock, as if he'd just been told the man was from Mars. A sheltered character might react that way in 1985, but in 2018? ●

ALSO STREAMING...



ATTACK ON TITAN SEASON 3

Of this season's sequels, there's no doubt which one's the biggest. Rushing straight on from season two – which was terrific, no question – we're into a part of the *Titan* story that has more human-scaled intrigue, fewer smackdowns between the Titans. Can a more monster-light show keep the interest of fans? Several of the "older" characters, such as Armin and Levi, were rather marginalised in season 2; can they recapture the limelight this time round? And will Eren ever get to use his blooming key?



FREE! DIVE TO THE FUTURE

Kyoto Animation is continuing two of its biggest franchises this year. In cinema, it's releasing two films in the world of *Sound! Euphonium* (see reviews), but on TV, it's gone back to the pool to make the first *Free!* TV series in four years. By this time in the story, some of the principal human torpedoes have separated. Haruka is now at college in Japan, while Rin is in Sydney, but don't worry; they'll soon have new shoals of characters surrounding each of them.



OVERLORD III

Overlord can't command the recognition of *Titan* or *Free!*, but our skull-faced hero soldiers on regardless. If you missed the first two series, they're about a gamer who gets stuck in the fantasy world of his game (so very familiar), but he plays the role of the traditional meanie of high fantasy, the tyrannical Dark Lord (so less familiar). The source material doesn't seem to be running out; there are 13 *Overlord* light novels so far, the most recent appearing only this April.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

HAPPY SUGAR LIFE

Be warned, it's *that* kind of cute series...



THIS JUNE, THERE was a rash of stories in the UK media about an anime-styled online game called *Doki Doki Literature Club*. As many of the reports emphasised, *Doki Doki* may have looked like a cute dating game about cute girls, but it was actually a twisted psycho-horror trap that ended up playing with *you*. A Sunderland coroner suggested there was a link between the game and an actual tragic suicide – the boy in question had reportedly played the game, hence the media storm. For the record, the game was made in America, not Japan, though its anime stylings are evident and it was reportedly meant as a critique of moe media. The jury should also note there was a clear “content warning” at the very start of the game.

Anime fans, of course, have long known that horror can come disguised in cute ribbons and bows. *Madoka Magica* is an icon of the form, along with *School-Live!* and *When They Cry* (see reviews this issue). And now this TV season throws up another warped specimen in *Happy Sugar Life*, which pushes things further still. You could guess that it does violent and traumatic things to its pretty smiling characters. But *Happy Sugar Life*, as you may have guessed from its name, ramps up the sex too, with extreme perversity and incredibly bad taste. Consider yourself trigger warned to the max.

Happy Sugar Life’s central character is also its central mystery; she’s the feisty-seeming schoolgirl Sato. Her parents have died, and she supposedly lives with her aunt – at least that’s what her friends and school believe, though there’s no sign of any adult when we follow Sato home. Instead the person waiting anxiously for her is a super-adorable little girl called Shio. Sato and Shio

adore each other with an intensity that’s extreme even for anime; Sato dotes on the mite as if she’s the most precious little sister in the world. The snag is Shio is not Sato’s sister, and her face is adorning “Missing” posters in the streets outside.

But there’s an even more worrying issue, which is that many of the characters in *Happy Sugar Life* seem to be mad, or else going mad. Okay, so we could put it more sensitively and say these people are having psychological issues, but there’s not much sensitivity here. This is a series in which, for example, the trauma of sexual abuse is conveyed through the following story-arc: a handsome boy is seduced by an adult woman who ties him up naked in a cupboard, so that the boy develops a terror of all adult women... and promptly becomes a slobbering paedo instead.

FREAKY FAIRY TALES

One of the show’s motifs is generational mistrust, youngsters who refuse to trust adults or their claims of authority. The woman seducer, for example, is the workplace boss of both Sato and the unlucky lad. Soon after we meet a pervert male schoolteacher who’s locked onto Sato as easy prey, more fool him! Sato’s very able to deal with these grotesques, but then there are clear signs that she may be the maddest – okay, the most *disturbed* – of them all. There are images of one of her red eyes being blown up into a spinning crimson maelstrom, and glimpses of her thoughts as a snowstorm of scratchy writing... and that’s *before* we see bloodstained bin-bags behind a locked door in her home.

As with other “shock” late-night series, such as the Sapphic-themed *Citrus*



from a couple of seasons ago, it's hard to gauge if there'll be anything *behind* the shocks when *Happy Sugar Life* ends. Like gross-out horror flicks, a lot of the show's appeal is in its quasi-pornographic teasing of the audience; how far it can go? One horrid joke turns on the ambiguities of a babyspeak word, "booboo." The big issue for many viewers will be the lolicon content, with suggestive images of the innocent Shio that seem to break down any distinction between satirising depraved anime and rolling round in that depravity.

Beyond that, though, the story's undeniably addictive, with the core relationship of Sato and Shio to care about, and both characters still mysterious halfway into the series. Amid the grossness, there are echoes of fairy tales, with Sato presented as both an oppressed Cinderella and a schoolgirl Bluebeard with ghastly secrets. There's what looks like a flash-forward scene at the very start of the story, a scene that would seem to rule out any happy ever afters. Still, these shows are deceptive to the end. *Happy Sugar Life* could end in a deluge of schmaltz rather than gore, though we'd bet on a shower of both substances mixed together into a sickly-sweet goop. ●

CREATOR CREDITS

Like many anime, *Happy Sugar Life* has two director credits, "Chief Director" and plain "director" – the latter often does much more of the work. The Chief Director is Keizo Kusakawa (*KanColle*) and the director is Nobuyoshi Nagayama (*My Girlfriend is Shobitch*).

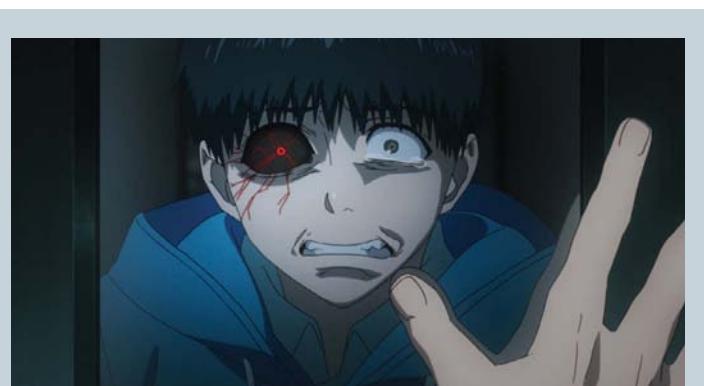
Animeism

In Japan, the series is part of a late-night programming block called "Animeism" on the MBS channel (comparable to "Noitamina" on Fuji TV). Past Animeism shows included *K, Kill la Kill, Ajin: Demi-Human*, the CG *Berserk* series, *Blue Exorcist: Kyoto Saga* and the lesser-known but acclaimed period drama *Descending Stories: Showa Genroku Rakogu Shinju*. Animeism series are now streamed exclusively on Amazon Prime; we wonder what the Amazon execs made of *Happy Sugar Life*.

The Manga

This show's based on a strip by Tomiyaki Kagisora, who previously wrote a manga adaptation of the cute "girls' choir" anime, *Tari Tari*. Did Kagisora opt to go gruesome on the rebound from that, we wonder? The *Happy Sugar Life* manga is serialised in the *Gangan Joker* magazine, and runs to eight volumes so far in Japan. The series was acquired for English translation by Yen Press.

1. Closer than sisters, Sato and Shio.
2. Entertaining customers at the maid café.
3. Grown-ups are the real enemy.



THE CAST

For followers of voice-actors, one of the show's biggest shocks is the presence of famous names in the cast. Sato herself is voiced by omnipresent actress Kana Hanazawa, who should need little introduction; she's also voicing Mayuri in the ongoing *Steins;Gate 0*. The voice of the, ahem, troubled youth (see main text), called Taiyo, is an even bigger shock. It's Natsuki Hanae, who played the heroes in such series as *Your Lie in April*, *Aldnoah.Zero* and *Tokyo Ghoul* – yes, he voiced Ken Kaneki.

GETTING FESTIVE!

Fireworks, food and festivities; Mark Guthrie gets to grips with Japan's summer culture

HAVE YOU EVER, on a rainy Guy Fawkes Day, as you unenthusiastically spin a sparkler, watching some idiot unadvisedly returning to a fizzled-out Catherine Wheel, thought to yourself... "festivals should be better than this"?

MATSURI TIME!

For Japanese, the summer *matsuri* (festival) season is perhaps the best time of the year. Festivals are for small kids, candy apples coating their faces, spending their pocket money at stalls where they catch fish or win pellet guns as prizes. Festivals are for teenagers, girls with immaculately coiffured hair wearing beautiful summer *yukata* kimono, courted by boys looking sharp in sober *yukata* of their own. Festivals are for the town's elderly, who join together on tarps spread across the community's grounds, eating grilled squid, *yakisoba* noodles, drinking jars of sake and watching the youth pass by performing the same courting rituals that they themselves had done decades before, as the taiko drums beat and the scent of fried food hangs in the air. Festivals are evocative of youth and a halcyon era, bringing communities together as they gather to coo and marvel at the fireworks exploding in the night's sky.

From babies wearing miniature *jinbei* to their sake-soaked grandparents, everyone loves a festival. Whether it be in the smallest of hamlets, to events attended by millions, each festival has its own charm, purpose and history.

AOMORI NEBUTA MATSURI (AOMORI)

One of Japan's great summer festivals, the Aomori Nebuta Matsuri sees illuminated floats in the shapes of samurai warriors and mythological beasts dragged through the streets, with performers dancing and stamping their feet as they parade through town. Pleasant enough, you may think, but these customs have a dark past.

Following defeat at the hands of future shogun Sakanoue no Tamuramaro, rival warlord Aterui was beheaded, with his followers condemned to death. After being forced to dig large pits, these warriors were buried alive, the victorious stamping the dirt down on their heads. On their shoulders the massed executioners carried a float dedicated to Tamuramaro, and the stamping became a dance of macabre, murderous celebration.

AWA ODORI MATSURI

Being part of the Obon celebrations, during which the Japanese believe that spirits of their ancestors return, the Awa Odori Matsuri is another dancing festival that centres around death.

Its origins are said to date back to 1586, when Lord Hachisuka Iemasa held celebrations for the opening of Tokushima Castle. The locals, enjoying copious

"BEING PART OF THE OBON CELEBRATIONS, DURING WHICH THE JAPANESE BELIEVE THAT SPIRITS OF THEIR ANCESTORS RETURN, THE AWA ODORI MATSURI IS ANOTHER DANCING FESTIVAL THAT CENTRES AROUND DEATH."

amounts of sake, barely able to stand, staggered around the celebrations. Amused by this, others picked up instruments and began to sing: "Fools dance and fools watch, if both are fools, you might as well dance."

Now each year dance troupes parade through the Tokushima streets, shaking their stuff, and though the dances and costumes are more elaborate, the song remains the same. As does the level of booze-induced 'refreshment'.

GOZAN NO OKURIBI

During Obon celebrations, it is customary for Japanese to light fires, or *okuribi*, in order to guide ancestors to and from the spirit world, generally taking the form of lanterns placed outside of the home. Kyoto's Gozan no Okuribi Matsuri takes this practice to the extreme.

It is believed that, following the death of his infant son, Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa had an expanse of Mt. Daimonji stripped of its trees, and in their place built an immense *okuribi* which was set afire on the mountain's face, guiding his child to the family shrine in the famous 'silver temple', Ginkakuji.

Another tale asserts that famed monk, Kobo Daishi, lit a huge kanji character 'dai' 大 on the mountain when praying for an end to a plague. Whatever the truth may be, today the festival is even more extravagant, with five mountains (gozan, in Japanese) lit up with these huge *okuribi*, making for a staggering sight.

OWARI TSUSHIMA TENNO

A more sedate summer festival is the 600-year-old Tsushima Tenno Festival; not that its origins match this tranquillity. Throughout the 14th century, two rival courts fought to be recognised as the true imperial rulers of Japan. In one battle Prince Ryou, grandson of the Southern emperor, escaped to Tsushima, pursued by warriors of the Northern court. However, upon their arrival in the town, the locals persuaded the northerners to take time out to enjoy a boating excursion on the Tenno River, enabling Prince Ryou to make his getaway.

Each year, this event is remembered by the floating of five luminescent ships along the river. Each of these are crafted by lashing two boats together with purified ropes and built up with lanterns to represent a mountain (though they look more like brilliantly glowing mushroom caps). Each vessel carries lanterns representing the days and months of the year in a bright dome shape. It is this cacophony of light, combined with the explosions of fireworks overhead, that really makes this festival something not to be missed.

SOMA NOMAOI MATSURI

If picturesquely tranquil isn't your thing, then check out the Soma Nomaoi Festival. Some thousand years ago, warlord Taira no Kojiro Masakado came upon an innovative way to ensure that his soldiers were ready for battle: having his cavalry chase down, capture and subdue wild horses. While this was great practice for the soldiers, it wasn't so good for the beasts, as those that were caught were offered to the gods. Though not so brutal, the modern-day festival is no less exciting; it kicks off with a horse race, yet this is no Royal Ascot, and there is not a top hat nor a fascinator in sight. Instead participants are dressed in traditional samurai military garb, charging around the course to capture sacred flags.

On the final day unsaddled horses are released into a field, while combatants attempt to capture them barehanded, after which the animals are presented as offerings to the shrine. Fortunately, these horses are luckier than their predecessors, surviving the offering, ready to race again the following year. ●



Aomori Nebuta - Fisherman Wiki Commons.jpg by Fisherman



Photo by Mau Ojeda



1. A kabuki tale in float form, at the Aomori Nebuta Matsuri.
2. The Awa Odori Matsuri is a dancing festival that involves a lot of adult refreshments...
3. Summer time is fireworks season in Japan! 4. If you're too enthusiastic about your beer, most of the matsuri could look a little like this... 5. Brightly coloured happi jackets, usually worn only to festivals.



Photo by Rangi Thompson-McCall (@_rdaddy on Instagram)



Photo by Alejandra Acosta

MANGA SCHOOL with Ruth Keattch

WIZARD UNIFORMS!

IT'S SEPTEMBER, WHICH MEANS IT'S BACK TO SCHOOL TIME! I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, READERS, BUT IF I COULD BE ATTENDING A WIZARD SCHOOL, I'D ACTUALLY BE EXCITED ABOUT A NEW TERM. SO, LET'S GET OUR CHARACTERS READY TO GO TO WIZARD SCHOOL!

1. ESSENTIAL KIT

No wizard would be seen without their handy robes. If you watch *Harry Potter*, the one thing that you will notice first is that everyone is wearing a robe! Robes are different to coats or other more ordinary clothing – they drape and flow with movement. To start, draw your character's body, and then we can frame the robes over it. Follow the lines of gravity.

2. ELEMENTAL MAGIC

Robes are also very affected by wind, which means that if a breeze picks up – your character's robe will be flying too! Where you drew in your guidelines earlier according to gravity, do the same, but from the direction of the wind, and this will help guide you.

3. WANDS R US

Possibly the most important piece for any wizard – their wand! The *Harry Potter* wands will definitely give you more than enough inspiration for your own wands, but you can really use your imagination on this part! Start with your rough sketch of the shape and then fill out the details. Is your wand twisted, or straight? Made of wood or metal? Does it have engravings or embellishments?

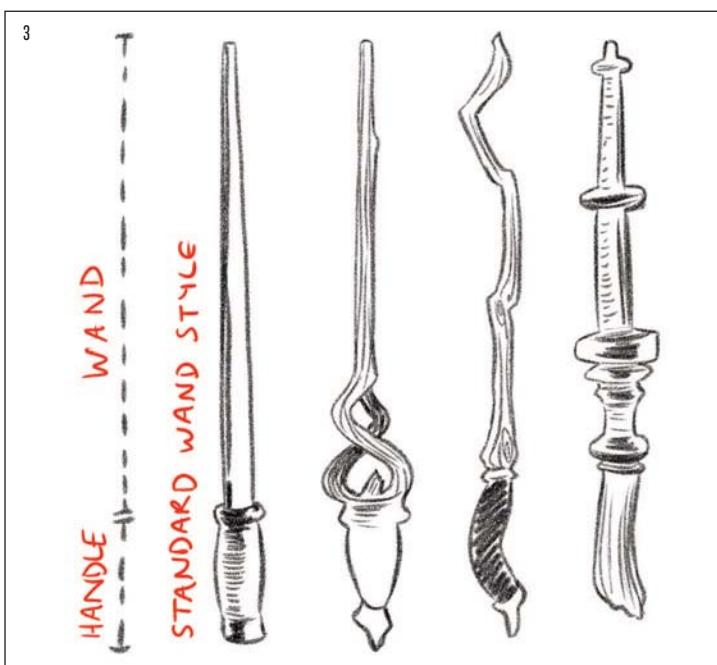
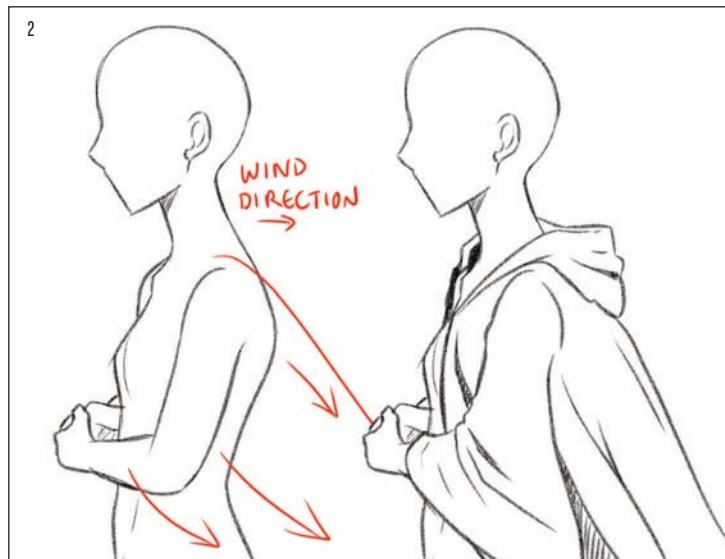
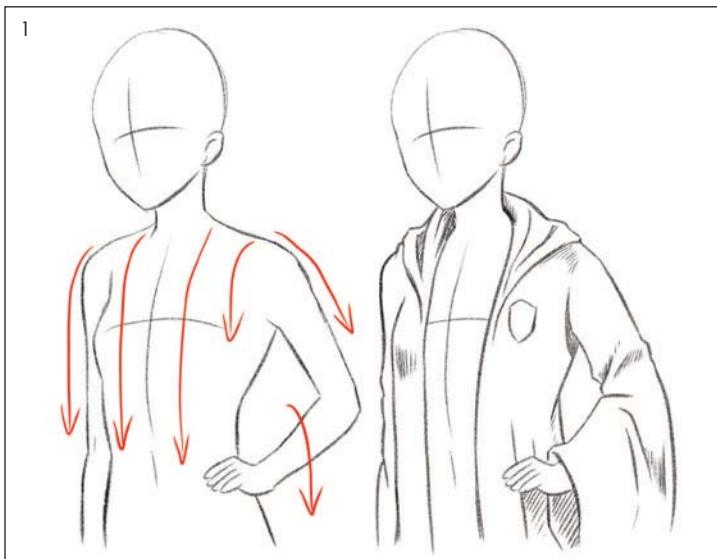
4. MAKE MAGIC

Now a wand isn't just about how it looks – it's about the spells it can cast! Drawing the effects around the wand will vary according to your spell: is it fire, light, water etc? We'll tackle fire and water here. For fire, draw lots of free strokes around the tip. Water uses more curved and curly details with water droplets for added effect.

5. IN MOTION

Let's put all of the elements together! Robe, wands and magic! Sketch your composition out and identify the motion in the image so your robes can follow naturally, and mark out the magic coming from the wand so you don't overly shade in those areas to make them stand out. You're wizards now, NEO readers!





BACK TO SCHOOL
 If you want a more traditional approach to the school uniform, our Manga School in NEO 142 covered both Japanese and western-style uniforms!





[ANIME REVIEW]

SOUND! EUPHONIUM

Tuning the orchestra

24 SEPTEMBER // ANIME LIMITED // PG // DRAMA, COMEDY, COMPETITION // £59.99 (COLLECTOR'S BLU-RAY) // 325 MINS // 14 EPISODES (INCLUDING 1 OVA EPISODE)

PLOT Young Kumiko, a euphonium (brass instrument) player, wants a fresh start at her new high school. With a couple of classmates, she joins the school's apparently hopeless orchestra. But both Kumiko and the orchestra will be electrified...

Sound! Euphonium is amazingly good, exceptional in its production, writing and characters. It doesn't renege on its selling points: it's funny, cute and bursting with pretty girls. But it's also layered and sophisticated; it conjures its story from an escalation of exquisite detail.

Its start is pure simplicity. Three girls – two perky, one passive – have just joined their school orchestra when it enters an inter-school competition, starting a series-long countdown towards the final performance. Long before then, we'll see characters scale emotional and literal mountains. There's an intense summer night encounter between girls on a hilltop; spiritual and sensual. There are conflicts between the students, driven by budding attractions and painful rivalries; and there's even friction between them and their soft-spoken boyish teacher.

The characters may be young, sometimes naïve, but Euphonium shows they've already lived through big experiences that they're still working out. Rarely relying on flashbacks, the

show makes clear its characters aren't simple types or blank slates. Kumiko, the passive-seeming viewpoint character, seems haplessly carried along by events – there are hilarious scenes where she's manoeuvred by other characters into doing what she wants least. But Kumiko is being quietly watched by another character who sees not weakness but substance in her. Another girl, the show-stealingly funny Asuka, brims with cruel humour, but then deepens into a true enigma.

Euphonium comes from Kyoto Animation, which is based outside Kyoto in the town of Uji, where Euphonium is set. (Many scenes take place on Uji's riverbanks, looking out to waters that shine gold in twilight.) Kyoto Animation gained new admirers with its cinema film *A Silent Voice*, but older fans praise it for lifting TV anime, injecting an often crass form with lyrical art and nuance, especially in its animation of girls.

Yet Kyoto's depiction of girls caused controversy. *The Anime Encyclopedia* damned the studio's *K-On!* and *Haruhi Suzumiya*, finding its girl characters "as objectified as any porn victim... constructed for the male gaze, but because they were constructed very cleverly, they can attract and deceive their own kind; decoy ducks for the patriarchy, and with such fine feathers."

This is not the place for recapping old flamewars. But note the hardline attitude; if you're a female who liked the girls in these shows, then you don't just have different tastes from the *Encyclopedia* writers, but you've been tricked by the patriarchy! That might be seen as pretty darn patriarchal, both to female viewers and to *K-On!*'s female director Naoko Yamada, who went on to direct *Silent Voice*.

EXTRAS

This is a subtitled-only edition; no English dub of the series has been made to date. The set also includes a 52-page booklet. As well as the 13 TV episodes, the set has an extra episode, the same length as the others, which was made for video. It's a side-story, set at the same time as the later TV episodes, and it focuses on the character of Kato. Unlike most OVA episodes, it extends one of the main series' plotlines substantially.



Between making those titles, Yamada was “Series Director” on *Sound! Euphonium*. The separately credited “Director” was the male Tatsuya Ishihara, who’d helmed *Haruhi*. *Euphonium* might be their joint reply to attacks on their work. While their critics refuse to compromise, *Euphonium* blatantly has things both ways. Yes, most of *Euphonium*’s characters are schoolgirls, often

“SOUND! EUPHONIUM IS AMAZINGLY GOOD. YES, IT’S BURSTING WITH PRETTY GIRLS, BUT IT’S ALSO LAYERED AND SOPHISTICATED.”

emphatically cute in their comically earnest conversations. One girl stands apart from them; she’s a quasi-adult with a seductive magnetism, self-possessed rather than coquettish as she hooks Kumiko. The girlier girls are sometimes framed in clearly sexual ways over and above the baseline suspicion of how male viewers watch a show full of bobbing skirts and bare legs.

Yet if *Euphonium* is a decoy duck, then it’s tricking the male viewers, not the females. In part one, the first moments feel cringingly clichéd and creepy. Kumiko walks to school through a blizzard of spring blossom, reflecting in voice-over on her breast size and her school uniform. Does this set the tone? Hardly; there’s just one more boob joke in the whole series.

Again, *Euphonium*’s first episodes are full of cutesy screenwipes involving little balls and stars. But by the later episodes, these wipes are themselves wiped.

Some fans will still argue with *Euphonium*, and not just for being a schoolgirl show. It also highlights same-sex attractions in the normal anime manner. That is, it refuses to confirm that girls who passionately express their love for other girls could be gay... which doesn’t stop these scenes from being hugely affecting and non-prurient, like Ghibli’s *When Marnie Was There*.

Beautiful as it looks, *Euphonium*’s animation doesn’t reach the liquid lusciousness of Kyoto’s *Hyouka*. Rather, *Euphonium* depends as much on storyboards, framing and voices – apt for a story of the different parts of an orchestra finding harmony. One scene, in part 12, is feted by animation fans for its technical and visual excellence; it has a running girl. But the scene’s real force is on the audio side; it comes from the girl’s desperate cries as she runs, counterpointed by a mild, neutral piano.

The series’ worst flaw is its final only-good episode that can’t cap the running girl (or top the climax in the “extra” OVA episode which cleverly expands on the TV ending). Still, the last episode has a superb bit of viewer manipulation, again depending on sound. Even if you see people react to a piece of news, that won’t always tell you if the news is bad or good if you can’t hear them.

We’re docking *Euphonium* half a mark for a mildly disappointing last episode. Otherwise, TV anime gets no better than this. ●

✿✿✿✿

MORE TO COME...

As of writing, the original *Sound! Euphonium* series is the only part of the franchise to be licensed in the UK. However, there is also a 13-part sequel series, while a spinoff feature film, *Liz and the Blue Bird*, was released in Japan this spring. A further *Sound! Euphonium* film is due for release next year.



COMIC WHAT?
 Firstly, you will be pleased to know that it's pronounced "Kyun". But as to what that means, take your pick. Kyun in Japanese either means the sound of a raccoon-dog's cry, or, more likely, the manga sound effect for a strong emotion set off by a touching scene or pathetic sight.

MANGA SNAPSHOT

COMIC CUNE

Jonathan Clements on a storm in a D-cup

ISSUE #28 // DEBUT YEAR: 2014 // PAGE COUNT: C.400 // PUBLISHER: MEDIA FACTORY // PRICE: 540 YEN (£3.70) // CYCLE: MONTHLY

HER NAME IS Neneko, in case you were wondering, and she is the magical shrine maiden protagonist of *Spirits & Cat Ears* (1) by Miyuki Nakayama, cover story for this issue of *Comic Cune* (2). Neneko was a shut-in, walling herself off from the world until, in a magic-realist allegory of teenage depression, she was possessed by the fox spirit that gave her those ears. She conjured a familiar for herself, manifesting as an attractive human youth called Shichikage, who sometimes carries her in his arms, and in an odd reversal of the supposed mistress and servant relationship, leads her around by a collar chained to her neck.

Well, this has to be catnip for manga fans. Pretty girls play with sorcery, summon magical non-boyfriends and go to work at an all-girl exorcism clinic. A bit of chaste romantic tension, some girly interactions, and a possession-of-the-week storyline bringing new ghostly chills to what is essentially a medical drama featuring pint-sized jailbait. It seems to be a title that reaches out to the lonely manga fan wishing for an adoring companion of the opposite sex, and some light ghost-busting. No wonder it's already on its seventh volume. But what it's doing in *Comic Cune* is anybody's guess.

Comic Cune started off as a pull-out supplement inside *Monthly Comic Alive* (described by this column in NEO 95 as being "packed with refreshing little gems") before getting its own place on the shelves in 2015. It's not clear to me why this happened, but I suspect that it's something to do with the fact that *Alive* has been running for a decade, and the editors picked a good time to split between older and younger readers. Moreover, the sudden cell division of the *Alive* paramecium came four years after its publisher, Media Factory, was sold off to Kadokawa for £67 million. In other words, the dastardly, moustache-twirling business magnates among you will already be suspecting a deal of corporate restructuring, and with it, the need to wriggle out of old contracts that only lose their power if a manga artist moves to a "new" publication.

The weird thing about *Comic Cune* is that it almost didn't make it into the Manga Snapshot in-tray. In teeny writing on the cover is the legend: "Kawaii 4koma Magazine for You," implying that it is packed with single-page funnies that usually are disqualified from this column, because they don't make for particularly attractive page layouts. This, admittedly, is a form of snobbery on my part, since even if something has the disposition and contents of *Peanuts* or *Garfield*, it is just as valid a "Japanese comic" as any other. And

in an age where billion-dollar film franchises can be spun out of a theme-park ride, it is ridiculous to think that there won't be enough of interest to NEO readers in a franchise that only fills a page a month.

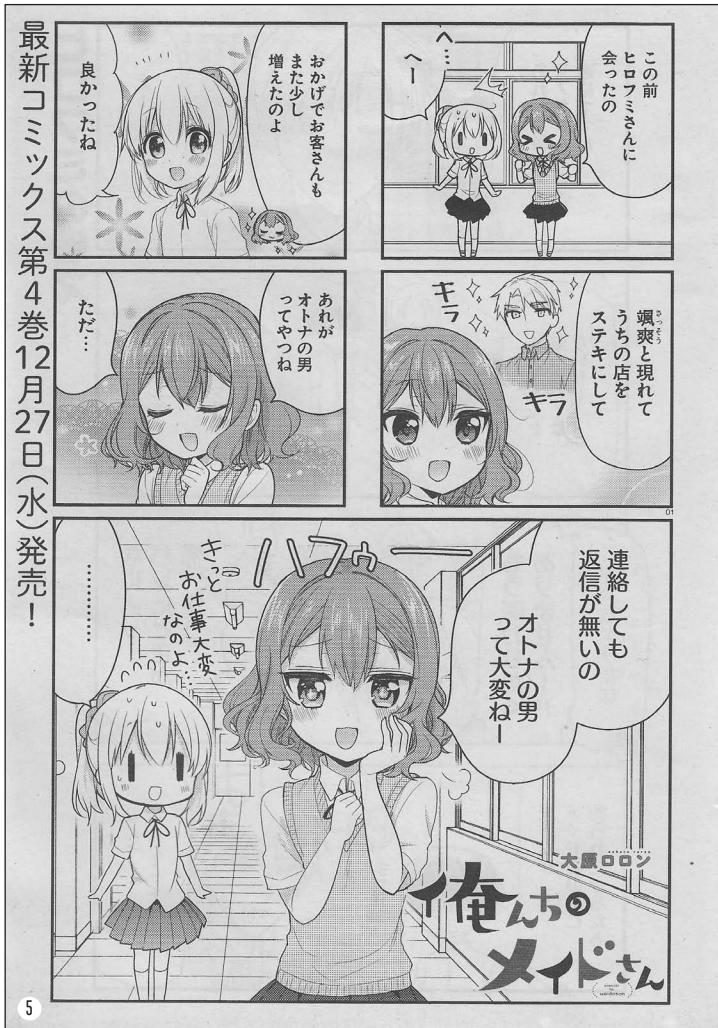
But perhaps I am not the only one who has a problem with four-panel strips, because *Comic Cune* doesn't seem to like them, either. Despite being a component of its original *raison d'être*, four-panel strips are curiously absent from much of the title, which is instead packed with dynamic, big-eyed adventures that we might as well call, well... manga. Starting with *Spirits & Cat Ears* on the cover.

PHANTOM THREADS

Alice or Alice: A Sister-holic Brother and His Twin Sisters (3) by Riko Korie, gets an inset on the cover this issue because it's being adapted into an anime. And so I leave you to Jacob Chapman from Anime News Network, whose review of the summer broadcast seems beautifully apt: "Twin moeblob sisters roll around in bed, make faces at the camera and fill their brother's day with cutesy bliss. Unless you're desperate for even more anime boobs, this one might as well not exist." *Alice or Alice* started off as a single page in *Comic Cune*, and somehow struck such a high note with the readership that it has expanded to these proportions. I think we are supposed to find it cute that these clueless Barbies bend and stretch all around the frame, occasionally fawning over their sibling. Here's a sample strip: "Oh noes, my skirt is too short! / Yes it is, I can see your pants! / Oh no! / What are you looking at?" Your pants, obviously (4).

It's hardly Shakespeare, I know. It's difficult to imagine even fans of *Alice or Alice* awaiting the next instalment with any enthusiasm at all, but something tells me that the manga is really little more than a delivery system for pictures of the characters, and that one presumably can buy little dolls of them, or pictures of them on a hugging pillow. This issue alone comes with a giveaway plastic wallet that features one of the sisters bending over suggestively, displaying a generous side-boob. But even artist Korie seems to yearn to think literally out of the box, drawing one of her pages with greater love and care that entirely dispenses with the four-panel format.

Miss Maid at My Place (Orenchi no Maid-san, 5) by Roron Ohara similarly claims to be a four-panel strip, and indeed >>>



最新コミックス第4巻12月27日(水)発売!



NOTHING FROM OUR SPONSORS

Oddly, there aren't a lot of ads in *Comic Cune* – almost every bit of marketing space is taken up flogging other products by Media Factory, or the Media Factory manga art competition. No sex lines, no nudie pics... nothing. A very strange state of affairs for something billed as an "adult" magazine.

>>> appears as four-panels per page for a while, before suddenly breaking out into a more dynamic format, as if it has realised that nobody is watching. And I think I am detecting an underlying theme in the manga in this magazine since the plot synopsis sounds very familiar. Teenager Takaomi lets his classmate Sarah come and live at his place, as long as she works as a maid. She doesn't much like the idea, but apparently needs the money, and Takaomi offers to make all her clothes for her as a bonus.

Yes, a "bonus". It all sounds rather creepy to me – the action, such as it is, seems to largely revolve around the degree that either of them regards themselves as a real couple playing house, or Sarah as a dogsbody with unreasonable claims on the love of her "boss". We've seen plenty of anime and manga in which teenage boys somehow acquire a mysterious, magical or otherwise untouchable girlfriend with whom they are somehow obliged to chastely share their living quarters. I just find it a bit unsettling that the late 20-teens version of this appears to be an allegory of workplace sexual harassment! Then again, if you wanted to split hairs, even the original live-in-girlfriend-in-the-bedroom-closet, Rumiko Takahashi's Lum, was technically a bartered bride forced to cohabit with the victor in a galactic competition, so perhaps times haven't changed so much.

Not every story in *Comic Cune* is about a lonely boy who somehow snags a live-in dollymop. *Miss Vampire Next Door* (6) features a schoolgirl who wants a friend, and gets more than she bargains for – the clues are in the title. The consumptive, pale-and-interesting shut-in Sophie Twilight turns out not to be a simple goth girl at all, but a 360-year-old vampire who shacks up with a slightly more normal schoolgirl in order to create quirky flatmate-related comedy. You, too, may have to share your abode with a friend who keeps chilled human blood in the fridge, and who likes going to conventions in frilly dresses. But even here, Amatou's artwork seems

"WELL, THIS HAS TO BE CATNIP FOR MANGA FANS. PRETTY GIRLS PLAY WITH SORCERY, SUMMON MAGICAL NON-BOYFRIENDS AND GO TO WORK AT AN ALL-GIRL EXORCISM CLINIC."

desperate to escape from the confines of its supposed "four-panel" mode. Some pages do indeed have four panels on them, but they are super-wide ones that any passer-by might mistake for a normal comic. And some pages, again, are just your everyday manga, with the zooms, cut-outs and differing panel sizes you might expect.

On the understanding that there is still an innocence of sorts at work, and that the creators in *Comic Cune* are simply trying to find new narrative ways to force shy teens to interact in a slightly racy manner, the stories in here are all part of a long tradition. I'm 47 years old; these stories are not for me, but fans closer in age to the target reader tell me that I'm seeing perversion and corruption where none is intended. Moe-love, they claim, is truly innocent, born from a desire for romance and human attention. These stories are being consumed by an entire generation of only-children, flotsam of the Japanese recession, late-marriages for their parents, and the unaffordability of large modern families, for whom brothers and sisters, and sometimes even real-world friends are a literal fantasy. Do you believe that...? ●



VITAL STATISTICS

Continuing to make a mockery of the supposed four-panel format is */ Love the Best Boobs in the World* (7) by Wakame Konbu. Yes, that's a pseudonym, since it means Seaweed Seaweed, and you'd probably want to hide your real name as well if you were writing a comic about a kind-hearted teenager, Chiaki, who is best friends with classmate Hana, whose mammary glands are apparently the titular top of the tit tree. In this month's instalment, our two heroines go shopping for bras, which allows the implied male reader a delicious, erotically-charged peek at what goes on in lingerie shop changing rooms. Chiaki, in fact, is a wolf in sheep's clothing – as a girl, she gets a free pass into such inner sanctums, although she secretly has a fetish for large breasts, and loves to be around them.

Because NEO leaves no stone unturned in its investigation of Japanese culture, it's time to talk boobs. The Triumph company has been logging Japanese bust-sizes since 1980, allowing statisticians to plot a curve of Japanese... curves. The story it tells is a compelling one born from changes in Japanese dietary habits (particularly dairy products containing bovine growth hormones) and trends, suggesting that A, B, and C cups have been dropping for a generation. Whereas A-cups in 1980 were worth 58.6% of all Japanese bra sales, now they've fallen to 4.1%. 2016 was the tipping point – the first year in which D, E and F cup sizes represented more sales in Japan than A, B, and C.

However, before you rush off to impress your friends with this news, some things to bear in mind. Firstly, Japanese bra sizes are not the same as other countries'. A Japanese E-cup, for example, is the same size as an American

D-cup or a British DD.

Even allowing for these differences in definition, there is still a palpable change in bra-buying in Japan since 1980, but this does not necessarily mean that Japanese women are suddenly bustier. Triumph cautions that it may simply mean that women with bigger chests buy more bras, either as a feature of their struggle to find one that fits properly, or possibly because they are more likely to work in a sector that requires what we shall gingerly call *performative lingerie exhibition*.

University undergraduates who have suddenly decided on their final essay topic while reading this page are also advised to bear in mind that many Japanese bras are also *aspirational* – you might be a humble A-cup, wearing a padded C-cup because you think it will get you noticed. In that regard, the changing statistics may have less to do with changes in body type, and more to do with 21st century standards of beauty.

"BECAUSE NEO LEAVES NO STONE UNTURNED IN ITS INVESTIGATION OF JAPANESE CULTURE, IT'S TIME TO TALK BOOBS."



GOING FOR GOLD

Alex Jones charts the popularity of *Yuri!!! On Ice* across the globe

Between achieving worldwide fame, catching the attention of professional ice skaters, sweeping the Crunchyroll awards that year and even being name-checked in *South Park* of all things, it's fair to say that *Yuri!!! On Ice* was undeniably the smash hit of 2016, and arguably one of the most popular anime exports in recent years. But just what was it that made this seemingly formulaic sports series about a down-on-his-luck ice skater just so insatiable?

YAOI FACTOR

There are many reasons that contribute to the success of *Yuri!!! On Ice*, but for most the prevailing factor will always be its unique and unabashed depiction of same-sex relationships. Given the prevalence of yaoi (or 'boys love'), male same-sex relationships are hardly uncommon in the world of anime / manga, but for the most part the genre bases itself upon them being forbidden and / or perverse. *Yuri!!! On Ice* on the other hand takes place in a world that's completely free of discrimination and homophobia, something that the female writer and director team of Mitsuou Kubo and Saya Yamamoto were keen to emphasise.

After previously working on emotionally raw series such as *The Woman Called Fujiko Mine* and *Mitchiko & Hatchin*, Yamamoto was keen to work on a project about something she truly cared about, which is how this little series about figure skating eventually came to life. However sports anime rarely prove a worldwide hit, and modern success stories like *Free!* and *Keijo* suggest they often need that little something extra to break out. *Yuri!!! On Ice* isn't any different to those in that it oozes sex appeal, but it's just how it does this that truly sets it apart.

Taking main character Yuri Katsuki from a boy crippled with anxiety to a confident performer able to unconventionally express "Eros" through his routine, *Yuri!!! On Ice* is just as much about awakening to and channelling the different forms of love as it is succumbing to them. With his idol, five-time champion Victor Nikiforov, a man who seems to embody all the qualities Yuri seems to lack, Yuri gains far more than a coach determined to help him bring home the gold – he finds a partner to work through his anxieties with.

It's soon revealed that Victor has his own issues to work through, and in many ways he leans on Yuri just as much as Yuri does on him. Their adventure together is a true love story, and is presented in a world where the only obstacles in the way of them are their own neuroses. Its idyllic setting is both immersive and something to strive for, but that isn't to say that getting the series to include the content it did was an easy feat. Yamamoto noted that she had to push hard to include its iconic kiss scene, which despite being obscured, is anything but ambiguous.

DIVERSITY AND CHOREOGRAPHY

The inclusiveness of the series doesn't just apply to its LGBT coverage either, also stemming from the diverse range of foreign characters that make up the supporting cast. In addition to the Japanese Yuri there's the Russian Victor and Yurio to round off its core cast, with the other skaters in turn hailing from Kazakhstan, China, Switzerland, Thailand, Canada and more – creating an ethnically diverse series representing many places you seldom see in an anime setting. This is then further emphasised by the globetrotting aspect of the series, which sees the skaters compete all across the world as they aim for



Rink-side Research

After the series was initially inspired by the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, both Sayo Yamamoto and Mitsurou Kubo attended a number of ice skating events across the world for to prepare for its production. These not only included events in both Russia and China (both of which are featured in the series), but also the Grand Prix Finals themselves where the show's finale takes place.



"THERE ARE MANY REASONS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE SUCCESS OF *YURI!!! ON ICE*, BUT FOR MOST THE PREVAILING FACTOR WILL ALWAYS BE ITS UNIQUE AND UNABASHED DEPICTION OF SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS."

a place in the Grand Prix final. With stadiums and landmarks painstakingly recreated in animation, it's an attempt at accuracy on a worldwide scale.

The show's unbridled success can't be solely attributed to its characters though, with the professional skating community also commending it for its realism when it comes to the ice skating itself. The creators turned to Japanese figure skater Kenji Miyamoto to choreograph each of the skaters' routines, many of which he then performed himself so that the animation team could capture it from various different angles. Each routine tells its own story, with the choreography and music adding an extra layer to their respective character.

Said music is equally ambitious in its scope, ranging from orchestral arrangements to all manner of genres from across the globe. Then if that didn't bring things close enough in line with a real-life competition, the in-show commentary was also provided by Japanese sports announcer Katou Tahei.

American former figure skating champion Johnny Weir was just one of many to praise the series, commenting how closely the various storylines

mirrored events either from his own or his friends' own skating careers. The fact that even one of the show's funniest moments, in which a drunken Yuri pole dances in front of his friends and rivals, was commented on for its accuracy just goes to show that nothing was done half-heartedly.

Yuri!!! on Ice's almost instant global popularity may have come as a surprise to its creators, but they were certainly quick off the mark to both acknowledge and embrace it. After its name appeared in a blink-and-you'll miss-it scene on *South Park*, the show responded by featuring a flashback with a character in an outfit matching Eric Cartman's in its finale episode. Now two years later and *Yuri!!! On Ice* is still enjoying the same level of success it was during the time of its airing, with fans continuing to flock to official events and fan gatherings (see page 025!) as well collecting the swathes of new merchandise (including a rather unexpected *Hello Kitty* collaboration).

With sequel film *Yuri!!! On Ice the Movie: Ice Innocence* confirmed to be on the horizon, it's abundantly clear that the show's time on the rink is still far from over. ●



[FILM REVIEW]

BLOODY SPEAR AT MOUNT FUJI

Tales from the road to Edo

OUT NOW // ARROW ACADEMY // 12 // COMEDY, DRAMA // £24.99 (BLU-RAY) // 94 MINS

PLOT On their way to Edo, samurai Kojuro Sakawa (Teruo Shimada) and his retainers Gonpachi (Chiezo Kataoka) and Genta (Daisuke Kato) befriend their fellow travellers, including a young boy, and an itinerant Shamisen player with her little daughter, plus there's a thief on the loose and arrogant samurai to contend with.

Tomu Uchida is not a very well-known director in the west, but in the 1960s he made an outstanding series of films about the legendary swordsman Miyamoto Musashi starring Kinnosuke Nakamura. While later in his career Uchida would paint the screen red, 1955's *Bloody Spear At Mount Fuji* is a tragicomedy better described as a *jidai-geki*, a period film, than a *chanbara* or swordplay movie.

There's only one fight scene, right at the end, but the lack of bloodshed is no reason to pass the film over. The cast are all excellent, particularly Chiezo Kataoka as Gonpachi, who serves Sakawa as his spear-carrier, and Ryunosuke Tsukigata, who plays a traveller called Tozaburo whose true intentions and identity are only revealed late in the tale. The script successfully manages to juggle the fairly large supporting cast and their subplots, before eventually tying everything together in a very satisfying manner.

One major subplot involves the search for Rokuemon, a notorious thief who has been preying on travellers but whose face no one has seen, and the script sets up several possible contenders, which adds a little tension. Yet overall the tone is generally light and playful. Sakawa, we learn from Genta, is a gentleman when he's sober, but a mean drunk when he's been on the saké, so it's only a matter of time before he gets loaded with comical results.

Gonpachi befriends a young boy called Jiro (Motoharu Ueki) who clearly idolises the spear carrier, and there's another funny scene when an outdoor tea party held by a wealthy lord is spoiled by the smell of Jiro pooping in a nearby ditch. The gags are balanced by Uchida's criticism of the harshness of life during the feudal era. Sakawa may have a kind heart, but many samurai are arrogant and cruel, while Jiro is an orphan, always scrambling for his next meal. Then there's Otane (Yuriko Tashiro), a young woman on her way to be sold into prostitution by her destitute father. The sudden outburst of violence in the final act might seem to come out of nowhere, but Uchida is careful to establish the unforgiving environment that the characters inhabit. The staging of the fight has none of the lethal poise and precision of Kurosawa's films, like *Yojimbo*. Instead it's frantic and desperate – probably an influence on Kinji Fukasaku's 1970s gangster films.

Tomu Uchida slips a surprisingly powerful denunciation of inequality into his road trip movie, although it's the humour that will likely linger in the memory longest. The way that Gonpachi accidentally helps to capture the infamous Rokuemon is beautifully directed. ●

★★★★★

TRIVIA

1962's *Showdown At Hannyazaka Height*, from Uchida's Miyamoto Musashi series, has fantastic fight scenes so blood-soaked that they rival the gory *chanbara* of the 1970s like *Lone Wolf And Cub*.



428

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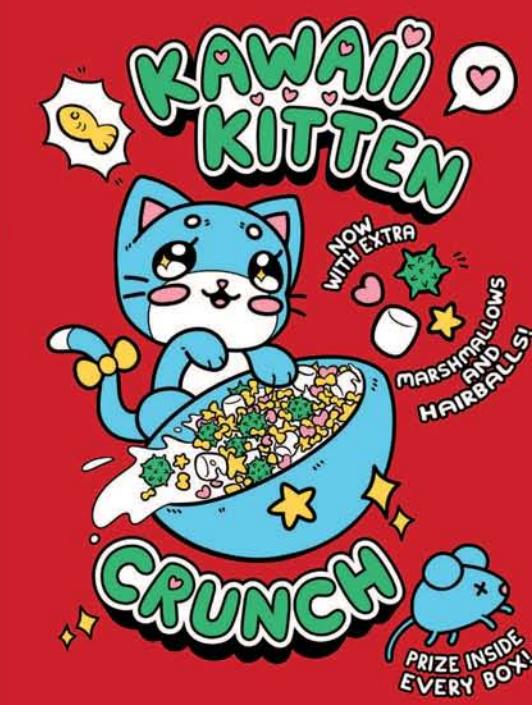
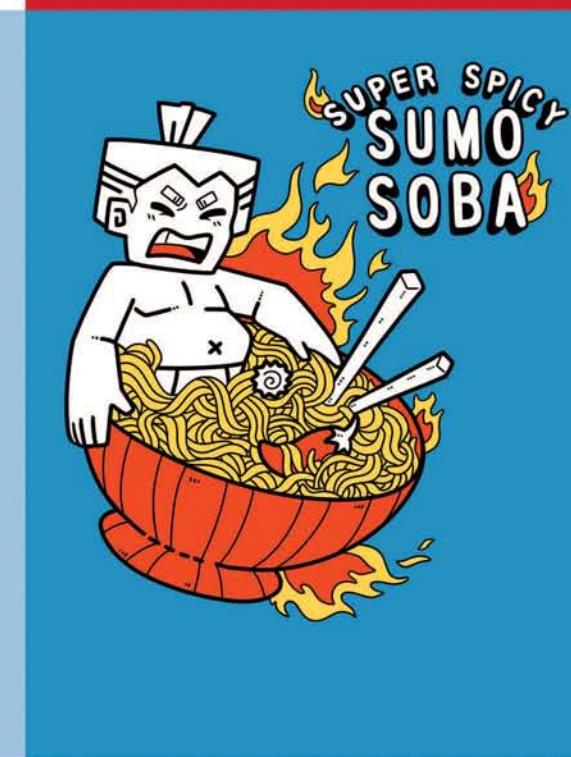
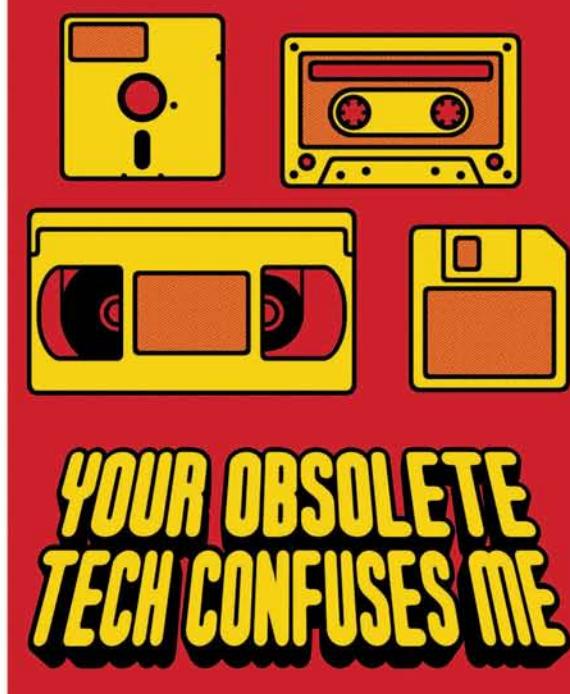
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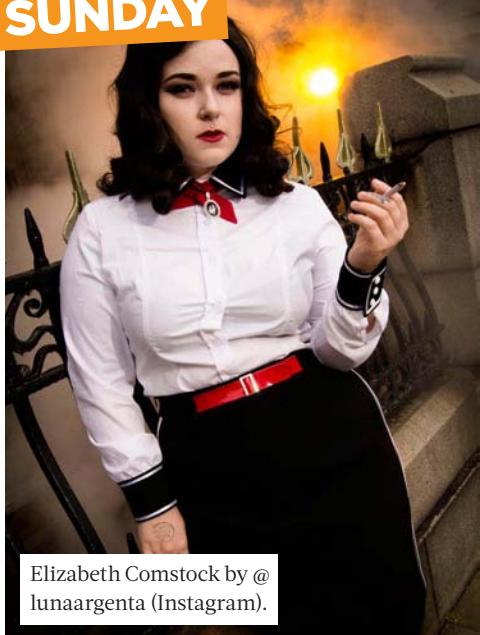


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[ANIME REVIEW]

KIZNAIVER

I feel your pain!



24 SEPTEMBER // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // TEEN DRAMA, COMEDY, SCI-FI // £59.99 (LIMITED COLLECTOR'S BLU-RAY), TBC (DVD) // 300 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT In a modern yet mysterious Japanese city, seven very different teenagers are rudely abducted and experimentally linked, so that if any one of them is hurt, all the others feel the pain. But what's the secret history of the Kiznaiver project?

Kiznaiver comes tagged with a big name. Mari Okada is riding high now thanks to her film *Maquia*; she wrote *Kiznaiver* in 2016. Articles on the making of the series indicate that it was a very collaborative effort, like most TV, and some of its fundamental ideas came from director Hiroshi Kobayashi. Yet *Kiznaiver* still seems to showcase Okada's talents.

The show's scenario – seven very different youngsters are used as experimental guinea pigs and find themselves sharing each other's pains – may sound like science-fiction. But it's far easier to enjoy *Kiznaiver* on the level of a teen anime melodrama, one that's self-aware without being ironic, that plays with the form without patronising it. Like the experiment it depicts, *Kiznaiver* depends on uniting an ensemble, with innumerable funny, painful and funny-painful interactions between its players. As an Okada-written anime, *Kiznaiver* fits between the film *Anthem of the Heart*, with which it shares themes of emotional repression, and the series *Toradora!*, with its journey from silly comedy to exquisite anguish.

The characters' interactions are so good that it doesn't matter that they're naked stereotypes, including a jock, a ditz, a girl next door, and two kids who speak with the dispassionate calm of Spock or *Eva's* Rei. Nor does it matter that the story has some sloppy holes and clumsy fudges; it's so darn *enjoyable*. Every second or third episode is a heartfelt crescendo, and the underlying story gels just fine, with a highly satisfying last episode.

There's an extra-strong subplot in the middle episodes, involving two girl artists working through a manga and their feelings at the same blossoming time. Beautifully told, these episodes might link *Kiznaiver* to yet another Okada-written anime, *Anohana*; in both cases, the story's taken over by a dead girl who's still very much present. The subplot also suggests that *Kiznaiver* may not just be about feelings and friendships, but also the power of fiction, where even exaggerated cartoon characters are imbued with real feelings.

The cartoon exaggeration comes courtesy of Studio Trigger, with excellent designs for the cast (the pouting jock's best). But *Kiznaiver* feels nothing like most fans' idea of a Trigger show – that is, like *Kill la Kill* – and closer to the humour and sensibility of another studio's anime, Tatsunoko's *Gatchaman Crowds*. *Kiznaiver* doesn't have so many weird aliens as *Crowds*, but it does have amusingly whimsical bug-eyed critters running round in the backgrounds called "Gomorin," though they're meant to be just henchmen grunts in silly outfits.

If you can get over the contrived set-up and some plot fudges, this is a hugely enjoyable tale of tormented teens. ●

EXTRAS

Japanese and English tracks. The standard edition includes a 40-page art booklet. As of writing, the AllTheAnime website is offering an exclusive deal, bundling together the Blu-ray edition with an 116-page artbook, but there are only 500 copies of the book available. (It is not available separately.)



[FILM REVIEW]

HORRORS OF MALFORMED MEN

OUT NOW // ARROW VIDEO // 18 // HORROR // £24.99 (BLU-RAY)
// 102 MINS

PLOT After being wrongfully imprisoned in a psychiatric facility, medical student Horosuke Hitomi (Teruo Yoshida) adopts the identity of the recently deceased Genzaburo Komoda. His ruse leads him to the island where Genzaburo's insane father conducts terrible human experiments.

Teruo Ishii's film is adapted from the writings of Edogawa Rampo, an author notorious for his work in the erotic-grotesque genre. It was originally released in 1969 and is indicative of the degraded state of Japanese cinema at the time. Ishii fills the screen with a parade of bizarre images – including a dance

act performed by people painted silver – but there's not much substance to the script or the characters. The plot owes a debt to HG Wells' *Island Of Dr Moreau*, but the film takes a very long time to actually reach the realm of the demented Jogoro Komoda (Tatsumi Hijikata) and it relies too heavily on narration and flashbacks to explain events. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the exploitative nature of the material, none of the female characters have developed personalities or any agency of their own. They exist either to be objectified (there are a lot of randomly naked women) or to be the victims of sexualised violence.

Ishii certainly creates a phantasmagoria of strangeness in *Horrors Of Malformed Men*, but the cluttered plotting and lightweight characters blunt the impact of the nightmares on display despite the director's obvious desire to make the film as shocking as possible. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM



[ANIME REVIEW]



RWBY VOLUME 5

It's also a gun

OUT NOW // MANGA UK // 12 // ACTION, COMEDY, FANTASY // £12.99 (DVD), £15.99 (BLU-RAY) // 243 MINS // 14 EPISODES

PLOT *RWBY* volume five picks up directly where volume four left off, with Ruby Rose and the rest of make-shift team Team RNJR travelling to Haven to protect the city's relic from falling into the hands of Cinder and her otherworldly leader, Salem.

Similar to volume four, things are a bit calmer this volume whilst Rooster Teeth set up the plot for greater things, and there's a strong focus on Jaune and Blake as pivotal moments of their current personal arcs come to a close. *RWBY* is well-known for its unique blend of action and comedy, which rarely falters, but

it's clear that Rooster Teeth wants the series to be known for its narrative too, and so far, they're succeeding.

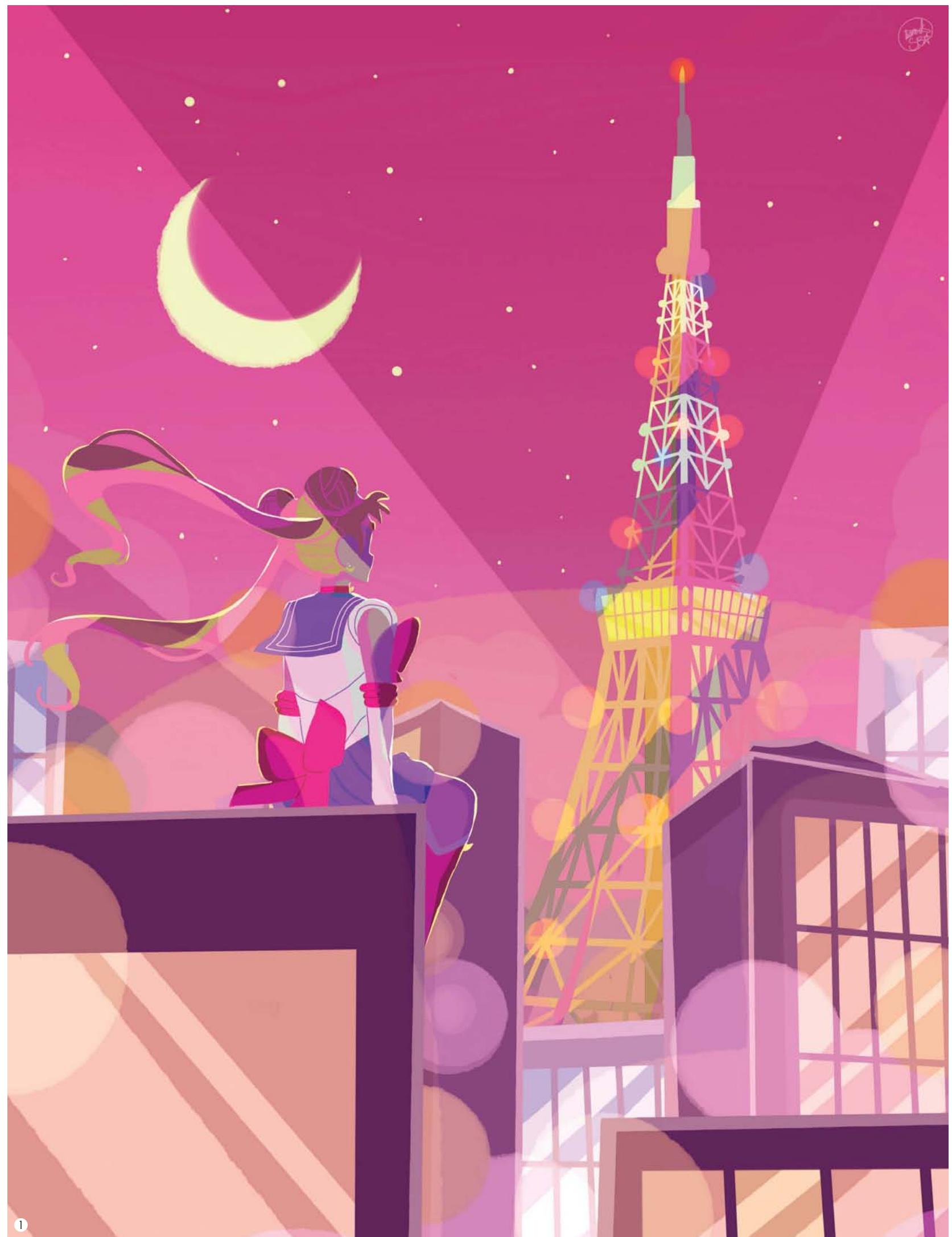
RWBY's bite-sized episode lengths, which only keep getting (thankfully) longer, work in its favour as each episode's cliffhanger encourages binging – and it's difficult to say no. It also makes it incredibly easy to rewatch! Volume five has the most fluid animations for the series to date, as fans will know that there's been a notable jump from earlier seasons, and Jeff Williams and Casey Lee Williams provide yet another toe-tapping, spectacular soundtrack.

RWBY five is one of the series' strongest volumes, and it sets up volume six with the promise that it will be Team RWBY's biggest challenge yet. Action-packed, funny and gorgeous, this instalment is nothing short of awe-inspiring. ●

★★★★★

THE MORE THE MERRIER

RWBY volume five has 14 episodes rather than the usual 12, and is accompanied by character shorts which further elaborate on the story and characters.



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JAY!

BIOGRAPHY

All my chosen school subjects revolved around creativity: fine art, graphic design, media production and photography. I took a break from drawing, but in my final year of studying photography at university I picked it up again, and here I am! I often got very frustrated and bored when I couldn't make my line art neat enough, even using painting software. When I got back into drawing I decided to scrap using line art all together. Now most of my work rarely even starts with a sketch, I go straight in with the paintbrush tool on multiple layers to create an image.

A lot of my work features day and night settings of the same scenes, often because I am indecisive when it comes to finishing a piece. I love to add small details when adding the final touches too. I'm greatly influenced by the background art from the original *Sailor Moon* anime series and try to include interesting colours into my work just like those scenes from the '90s.

Nearly everything I draw now includes a Pokémon somewhere in the piece. I've been playing *Pokémon* for as long as I can remember, I couldn't imagine my life without it. Sometimes I find drawing scenes without Pokémon in them a chore. Creating art has allowed me to bring to life the adventures I had with my Pokémon while growing up and help create new ones.

Recently I have been working on a series of *Pokémon*-meets-magical-girl-genre enamel pins dubbed 'Magical Love Healers'. Enamel pin collecting has had a rise in popularity recently, but I wanted to do more than just collect them, I wanted to create my own. Right now, I am working on the next pin collection: 'Magical Love Healers: Radiant Guardians', so keep an eye out! Find my blog at snackyboy.tumblr.com and my Instagram at instagram.com/snackyboyshop.



INSPIRATION

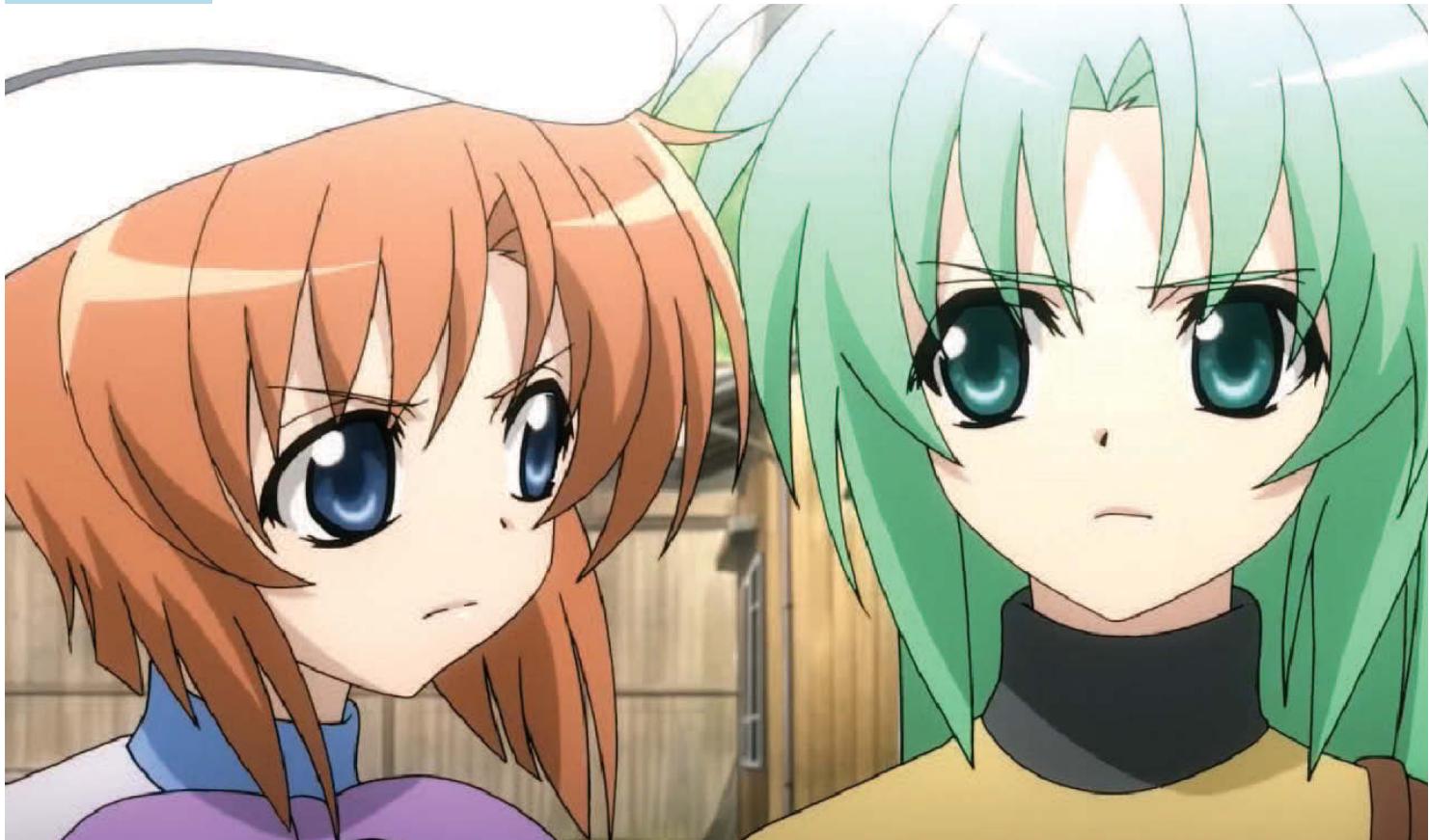
I'm inspired simply by the world around me, especially nature. *Pokémon* is a huge part of my life. I love the bright colours found in kawaii culture, and cute Sanrio characters. Magical girl anime stems from this, I love the outfits. I'm always drawing my friends as different things like cute dogs based on their personalities.



1. Sailor Tokyo: I wanted to do something super cute and pink featuring my girl Usagi from *Sailor Moon*. I love the lighting and colours I used. **2. Snack Adventure:** Drawing with soft colours is always fun, especially with fairy Pokémon! I packed so many critters in this piece, how many can you spot? **3. Midnight Dreams:** I did another version of this with Rowlett in the daytime, but I love the different things you can do with a night time setting.

NEO WANTS YOU

If you are interested in submitting work to be featured in the NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE, please email mail@neomag.co.uk with 'ARTIST SHOWCASE' as your subject header, along with an internet link with examples of your work.



[ANIME REVIEW]

HIGURASHI SEASON 1

Twists and torment

24 SEPTEMBER // MVM // 15 // HORROR, MYSTERY, PARANOIA // £39.99 (DVD) // 630 MINS // 26 EPISODES

PLOT High-school boy Keiichi has just moved to the country town Hinamizawa and loves it; the scenery, the colourful summer festival and the company – four lively girls in his class who welcome him into their midst. How could all this turn into a gory nightmare?

Like *Psycho* and *The Wicker Man*, the horror anime *Higurashi* has very spoiler-able tricks and twists, which is a liability when it's been around a while – it was broadcast in 2006. If you haven't been spoiled on *Higurashi* yet, we advise you not to Google it. Its early episodes tell a familiar creepy tale, comparable to *The Wicker Man*. A boy moves to a remote Japanese rural village, meets the lovely locals – especially the playful girls at his school – and then encounters myths and mysteries about the town's underside, drawing him into madness and murder.

It takes a few episodes before you discover what the show's really doing. *Higurashi* is a masterclass of non-linear storytelling, skipping around viewpoints and timeframes, yet staying completely involving and addictive through these 26 episodes. Its main trick isn't new; what's dazzling is how beautifully the show's built around it.

The series consists of several multi-episode storylines, character-driven horror tales that are presented as being the same story. They interlock so intricately that you start perusing

every detail. The stories all involve the country town, they're mostly set in the same summer, and they carry over the same characters – there are about ten important ones, including the boy and the assorted girls.

The early episodes feel like a spoof of anime harems – what are the unexpected dangers for a boy surrounded by lively females? Overall, though, it's more like the work of Satoshi Kon (*Paranoia Agent*). *Higurashi*'s characters act in radically – though never impossibly – different ways from one story to another. Murderers become heroes, then murderers again. Villains become victims. Characters switch in a second from friendly to frightening. Hunters of forbidden truths vanish or go mad.

We should stress this is *horror*; it's amazing the BBFC let *Higurashi* through at "15". There's much bloody-bladed violence, some against shockingly tiny victims, though even the horrible scenes often run contrary to the rules of torture-porn. Many of the victims refuse to see themselves as victims, defiant as they're sliced and torn. There are touches of more humorous horror; a middle plotline deals with a botched "perfect" murder. However, the same story's focus on little sister / loli fetishes will disturb some viewers more than the violence.

Aside from the terrific opening titles, Studio Deen's drawing is often unlovely and sometimes sloppy. But it's well-directed whenever it counts, with hysterical twisted faces and artfully-edited suspense and atrocities. The last episodes divulge partial answers to the deeper mysteries, but leave much hanging for season two.

Harrowing but full-blooded, this is one of the best-constructed anime series ever made. ●

★★★★★

EXTRAS

Japanese and English tracks. The second TV season (subtitled *Kai*) is due to follow in November, while the subsequent five-part OAV series (subtitled *Rei*) is due in December. Additionally, MVM will release a Blu-ray edition collecting this first season, *Kai* and *Rei*, in October.

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WIN HIGURASHI: WHEN THEY CRY SEASON 1

IT'S MID-SEPTEMBER which means only one thing: it's basically Halloween... well, as far as the shops are concerned, anyway. Get in the mood for the autumn with the gore-fest, cult classic *When They Cry*, which is being released as a complete season one DVD set from MVM Entertainment.

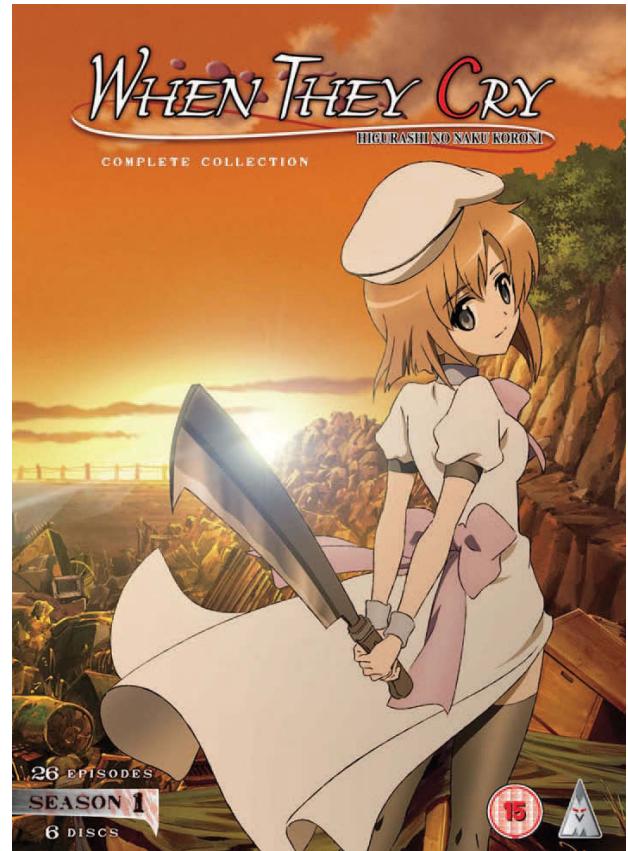
Set in the country town of Hinamizawa, *When They Cry* tells the story of new boy Keiichi, as he slowly discovers that not everything is as it seems in this blissful harem-style set-up. The idyllic countryside and cutesy characters soon dissolve into a frenzy of blood, guts and blades, as stories are rewritten, and then rewritten again, turning Studio Deen's traditionally relaxing and pleasant animation into a suspenseful, paranoid horror. Hailed as one of the best scary anime of all time, the show scored 4.5 this issue – check out page 064 for our review!

If you want to win a copy of the first season (26 episodes) of *Higurashi: When They Cry* on DVD from MVM, all you have to do to enter the draw is answer the following question correctly.

WHERE IS WHEN THEY CRY SET?

A) KYOTO B) HINAMIZAWA C) YOKOHAMA

You can enter by emailing your answer along with your name and address to neomagcomp@gmail.com, with the subject header NEO 180 When They Cry competition. Alternatively, you can enter by sending the correct answer on the back of a postcard, along with your address, to the Uncooked Media editorial address printed on page 084. Closing date: 18 October



TERMS AND CONDITIONS

No correspondence will be entered into. No employees of Uncooked Media or the companies providing the prizes may enter. No cash alternative is offered to these prizes. Entries are only valid if they reach us by the closure date. Multiple entries will be disregarded. The publisher's decision is final. Good luck!

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[ANIME REVIEW]

AND YOU THOUGHT THERE IS NEVER A GIRL ONLINE? COMPLETE SERIES

OUT NOW // MVM // 15 // ROMANCE // £29.99 (DVD), £34.99 (BLU-RAY) // 300 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT In MMORPG *Legendary Age*, Hideki Nishimura's character is married to Ako Tamaki's character, but when they meet, Hideki discovers that shy Ako struggles to separate the game from reality, insisting she's his wife.

Here's a show that chuck's a bunch of ideas into a blender but still manages to turn out a fairly cohesive story. There's a strong harem element as Hideki is the only male in his group of gamers, but there's no sense of the girls competing for his attention. As much

as the camera loves to creep on the ladies, the romantic angle is all about Ako and Hideki as he attempts to help her engage with the real world. The series itself cheats all the time on that front. With key characters, their online avatars look like the players themselves, yet that rule doesn't apply to supporting characters. There's a small action side to the story but while the battle scenes are colourful, this isn't *Claymore* or *Fullmetal Alchemist* by any stretch. However, the biggest problem the series faces is that Ako seems like she needs professional help, not a boyfriend.

A charismatic cast, a good dose of comedy, and lots of lovely sunset scenes. The melodrama isn't overplayed, although the script can't quite decide whether to treat Ako seriously or not. ●

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM



[GAME REVIEW]



YAKUZA KIWAMI 2

The Dragon Rises

OUT NOW // DISTRIBUTOR SEGA // CERT 18 // ACTION, COMEDY, RPG // £39.99 (PS4)

PLOT *Yakuza Kiwami 2* continues the Japanese-drama epic, and this time Kazuma Kiryu finds himself in the on-going war between the Tojo Clan and the Omi Family. It gets personal when Ryuji Goda, the "Kansai Dragon", targets Kiryu in a fight to determine who the greatest dragon of Japan is.

Kiwami 2 places you in two fictional cities – series mainstay Kamurocho, and Osaka's Sotenbori – and exploring them never grows old. Soaking in the rich atmosphere and taking in all that it has to offer is relaxing, until the groups of young thugs accost you, that is. Unleash the power of the Dragon of Dojima and feel

nigh unstoppable, regardless of what your opponents attack you with, as you lay waste to them with bicycles, ramen bowls, benches and, of course, your fists. Level up with arcade games, delicious meals and more to put the "dragon" in the "Dragon of Dojima". Kiryu isn't the only one who can throw a fierce punch though, as new content made for *Kiwami 2* sees you play as Goro Majima, and provides more backstory on the character. If the *Kiwami* games have proven one thing, it's that fans want more Majima, and Sega has delivered!

Yakuza Kiwami 2 is simply one of the best games you'll play, period. A city which feels as if you're truly a part of it, engaging combat, rib-tickling humour, a variety of mini-games and more await you in Kamurocho, along with Kazuma Kiryu, one of gaming's greatest protagonists. ●

AND ANOTHER ONE!

Yakuza Kiwami 2 is the fourth *Yakuza* game to be released in the west within the last two years.

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IRIS THE MOVIE

OUT NOW // 88 FILMS // CERT 15 // ACTION THRILLER // £17.99 (DUAL FORMAT) // 117 MINS

On the run after assassinating a North Korean official, secret agent Kim Hyunjun (Lee Byung-hun) uncovers a plot to detonate a nuclear bomb in Seoul. *IRIS* was originally a 20-hour Korean TV drama, now condensed into a two-hour movie.

Perhaps inevitably, the storytelling suffers from being whittled down so vigorously. There's so much plot to get through that there's little time left for character development. New faces are thrust into the story with no context – particularly Yuki (Karen Miyama), a girl that Hyunjun has to rescue from a kidnapper, but about whom the audience knows nothing.

The screenplay frequently shreds all credibility – the bad guys are impressively incompetent at catching Hyunjun – but the action barrels along at a delirious pace. ●

★★★★★



SHENMUE I & II

Looking for Sailors

OUT NOW // SEGA // 16 // ACTION, ADVENTURE // £29.99 (PS4), £29.99 (XBOX ONE), £24.99 (PC)

PLOT *Shenmue* follows Ryo Hazuki as he sets out on a journey to find the man who murdered his father. The game may be showing its age, but a gripping, flavourful narrative and unique mechanics make *Shenmue* quite unlike anything else on the market.

You've heard all of the ramblings from *Shenmue* fans about what a fantastic experience the games are, and it's not all bluster. *Shenmue* suffers from tank controls, horrific audio quality, a stiff English dub and visuals so dated that smiles sometimes look creepy, but underneath it all is a world rich with atmosphere, and a tale and characters that you'll fall in love with. A unique narrative and engaging characters

ARE YOU SURE?

It will have taken 18 years to get to *Shenmue III*, but series creator, Yu Suzuki, has stated that it won't wrap up the story as he wants to create more games.



PRETTY GUARDIAN SAILOR MOON ETERNAL EDITION 1

OUT NOW // KODANSHA // 13+ // SHOUJO // £24.00 // ACTS 1-7 // NAOKO TAKEUCHI

Sailor Moon is a legendary, golden shoujo title – and if you haven't taken the plunge and succumbed to its now retro charms, here's the perfect place to start. The first seven 'acts' of the manga introduce most of the principle characters, taking Usagi from her ditzy schoolgirl origins to her ditzy superheroine duties as a guardian of justice and love – and smitten with the hunky and mysterious Tuxedo Mask. You just can't beat this classic tale of friendship, magic and magical girl adventures as a young girl discovers her destiny as the Princess of the Moon Kingdom.

This 'definitive' edition is truly that – huge, weighty, and on glossy paper with sporadic colour spreads. A must for any Pretty Guardian. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM



© Naoko Takeuchi

shine through the rust of the aging games, and it's great to see them available to a whole new generation. *Shenmue* is a game that was ahead of its time, and so *Shenmue III* will hopefully be something special.

A proper remaster rather than a port with minimal changes would've been splendid – the Dreamcast controller is still in the menu UI under controls – especially as these need to sell newcomers on *Shenmue III*, but those of you who are mourning the lack of new *Yakuza* on the horizon will find a similar, but still rather different, experience to sink your teeth into. Accept *Shenmue* for its flaws, and you might be pleasantly surprised.

You do actually have to wait for the bus, though.

Shenmue I & II may be a hard sell for those who don't have nostalgia for the series, thanks to its awful controls and dated visuals, but there's a rich narrative with Japanese and Chinese influences which is hard to pass on. ●

★★★★★



[ANIME REVIEW]

YURI!!! ON ICE

Born to make history

24 SEPTEMBER // SONY PICTURES // TBC // SPORTS // £36.99 (BLU-RAY & DVD COMBO PACK) // 300 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT Japan's number one skater Yuri Katsuki is ready to call it quits after a humiliating loss, but that changes when his idol and five-time champion Victor Nikiforov offers to be his coach for the coming season. Together, they'll face skaters from around the world while discovering where their true feelings lie.

Where do you even begin when talking about what is undoubtedly one of the most popular shows in recent memory? On the surface *Yuri!!! On Ice* may just seem like another dime a dozen sports anime that just happens to focus on something a little different than the norm, but there's so much more to it than that. Between its depictions of anxieties and insecurities the series isn't afraid to tackle some heavy themes, but what sets it apart is an overwhelming sense of positivity that actively tries to make its audience feel good as well as simply entertain.

At the heart of this is the burgeoning relationship between Victor and Yuri, not only as student and pupil but also two people falling in love with each other. Writer Mitsuou Kubo and director Sayo Yamamoto worked hard to push its strong LGBT themes as much as they could in a television series setting, resulting in some sequences that are obscured or more symbolic but don't lack any of the intended impact. However despite taking place in a world

free of judgement, their story isn't one that simply plays like a cliché fairytale, instead being forged in shared experiences, misunderstandings and communication with one another.

But it isn't just Yuri and Victor that helped propel the series to greatness, as each and every skater that appears has their own story to tell no matter how developed it is. Behind the tough Russian exterior of Yuri's main rival Yuri Plitsetsky lies a 15 year old boy desperate to be recognised against those much older than him, while their other opponents from across the world share similar aspirations. Even the narcissistic JJ, the closest thing the series has a "real" rival character, has his own insecurities that are addressed. Despite all competing for the same goal, the core skaters never once feel like foes – they feel like family.

Of course, if it was the ice skating you came here for the series is unlikely disappoint in this regard either, with studio MAPPA truly establishing themselves as a force to be reckoned with. Even the repetitive nature of watching the same routines each episode doesn't hold the series back, with each minor alteration in the choreography brought about by mistakes or improvisations enough to keep things interesting. Combine this with a blistering soundtrack which perfectly conveys the emotions of their respective routines, and it's no surprise that the show got the attention of real-life ice skaters as well as anime fans across the globe.

All of these factors attribute to *Yuri!!! On Ice* being a fantastic series, but perhaps the most significant of all is just how pleasant it is throughout. Beautiful and positively upbeat even through its most dramatic moments, it's simply unmissable. ●



J-CULTURE

Yuri!!! On Ice hit the headlines once again earlier this year when Japanese skaters Miu Suzuki and Ryuichi Kihara used a piece of music from the show as part of their Winter Olympics skating routine.

[ANIME REVIEW]



LOVE HINA THE COMPLETE SERIES

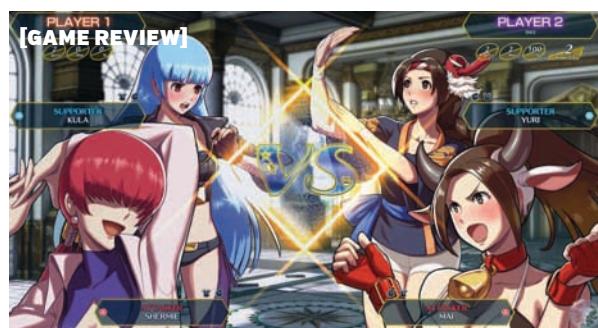
15 OCTOBER // MVM // TBC // ROM-COM, HAREM // £34.99 (DVD) // 625 MINS // 25 EPISODES

Guilty pleasure – or just pleasure? *Love Hina* has been entertaining otaku for 18 years, since the first release of the anime in Japan. Like so many cult classics, the set-up is simple: young wannabe student Keitaro's dreams are dashed when he fails the entrance exam to Tokyo University. See, he promised his childhood sweetheart they'd go together, and now not only has he failed to follow through, but he's lost touch with her too.

Luckily, there's a distraction on hand – to save money to try again, he's taken a job as manager of an all-female dorm. Each resident has their own unique personality, and amongst them, perhaps there's a blast from the past. (No! That would be too much of a coincidence!) What wacky hijinks will ensue? Hint: it involves fanservice!

A fan-favourite, fanservice-fuelled classic for a reason!! ●

★★★★★



SNK HEROINES: TAG TEAM FRENZY

OUT NOW // NIS AMERICA // PG // FIGHTING // £39.99 (SWITCH), £39.99 (PS4)

PLOT *SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy* sees a small selection of female fighters transported to a grand, but unrecognisable, mansion, where they're forced to wear skimpy and animal-inspired outfits and fight if they want to find out why they're there, and who put them there.

Something that should've been special for SNK fans ultimately feels light on content, lacks a roster that's indicative of the developer's history, and has gameplay so simple that it doesn't allow a great deal of room to experiment with. *SNK Heroines* isn't aiming to go competitive, and although it's been built from the ground up to be a simplistic game, there's little reason to pick this up as

a fighting fan. What should have been a big selling point in the roster fails to impress.

SNK Heroines doesn't impress in its visuals, either, with its 3D models being similar to *King of Fighter XIV*'s, which also suffered from somewhat stiff animations and not-so-flattering faces. It's an improvement but for a game which is inherently designed to be eye candy, it's more uncomfortable than appealing to see women flailing around in cow-inspired costumes. Each character has two extra outfits to unlock, alongside accessories, images and more, leaving you with plenty to aim for once you're finished with the incredibly brief story.

SNK Heroines: Tag Team Frenzy suffers from being too simple rather than more accessible. The 14 characters present manage to feel sufficiently different from each other, but not quite so much to excuse how tiny the roster is. This is far from the major cross-over which fans were hoping for. ●

★★★★★

ARTIST

Eisuke Ogura, who has been creating art for SNK since 1996, is the main illustrator for this game.



COWBOY BEBOP THE MOVIE

24 SEPTEMBER // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // CERT 15 // SCI-FI, ACTION // £14.99 (BLU-RAY) // 115 MINS

It's now the 20th anniversary of *Cowboy Bebop* (yes, really), so what better time to buckle in for the feature length *Cowboy Bebop* movie, which brings the best of the show's outrageous action, slick visuals, and cool characters to an extended, zany romp of an adventure? The action takes place between episodes 22 and 23 of the anime, and involves Martian terrorists, bioweapons, and – obviously – bounty hunters. The Bebop crew must hunt down the perpetrator of a truck explosion, which released a deadly virus that spreads throughout the capital city of Mars. Will they save the innocent Martians and bag their reward?

Available for the first time on Blu-ray, this feature-length outing for the bounty-hunting crew proves why *Cowboy Bebop* is still king of the sci-fi shows. Fun, addictive, and totally legal. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM

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WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO RELEASE ROUND-UP

THE STATE OF THE UK MARKET THIS MONTH

WE'VE REVIEWED THE "original" titles debuting in the UK in the next few weeks this issue. All three come out on 24 September: *Yuri!!!! on Ice* (Blu-ray / DVD combo) from Funimation, and Anime Limited's Collector's Blu-rays of *Sound! Euphonium* and *Kiznaiver*. So that's boy ice-dancers, girl musicians and motley teenagers sharing pain. You can't accuse anime of not having Catholic tastes.

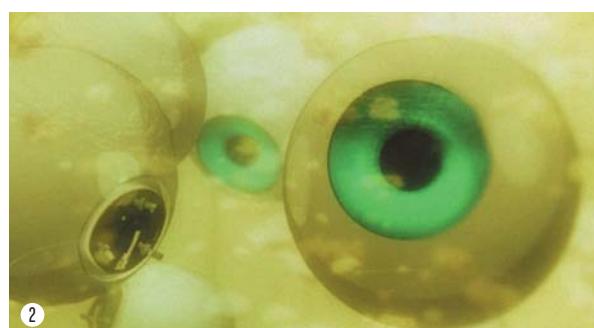
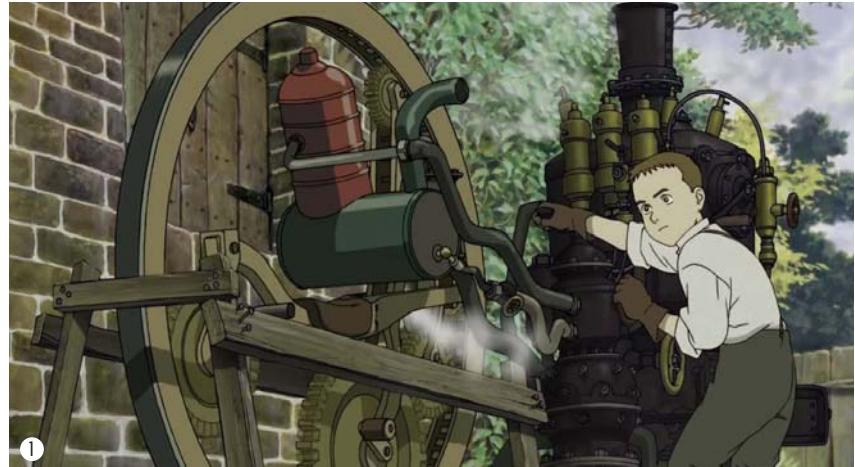
Manga Entertainment, meanwhile, is in the mood for fan-favourite movies, all released as separate Blu-rays and DVDs. September 24 sees *Cowboy Bebop The Movie* (Blu-ray and DVD), reviewed this issue, plus Satoshi Kon's *Paprika* (like *Inception* but more fun), and Katsuhiro Otomo's Victorian blockbuster *Steamboy*.

Mamoru Oshii's second *Ghost in the Shell* film *Innocence* follows on 1 October. The first *Yu-Gi-Oh!* movie from 2004 is on 8 October, and Satoshi Kon's Christmas comedy *Tokyo Godfathers* emerges on 15 October.

As for Manga's series titles, there's the third season of *Digimon Tamers* (DVD) on September 24, followed by the fifth volume of *Dragon Ball Super* (Blu-ray and DVD) on 8 October. That takes us up to part 65 of *Super* if you're keeping count. 15 October sees more *Dragon Ball* – the first volume of the hefty named *Dragon Ball Z Kai Final Chapters: Part 1* (Blu-ray and DVD).

Anime Limited's releases include *Junjo Romantica*'s first season (Blu-ray) on 24 September; we reviewed this *yaoi* comedy last issue. The season two Blu-ray of the series follows on 1 October. Then there's a retro release on 24 September; a Collector's Blu-ray of *Angelic Layer*, Studio Bones' 2001 series of the CLAMP manga about youngsters wielding telepathically-controlled dolls fighting it out in tournaments.

The feature film *K: Missing Kings*, continuing the story from the original *K* series, comes out on 15 October as a Collector's Blu-ray / DVD, plus a standard DVD. (The next slice of *K* will be another TV season, subtitled *Return of Kings*, due on 29 October.) If you're more in the mood for some mammary-fixated fanservice – this column doesn't

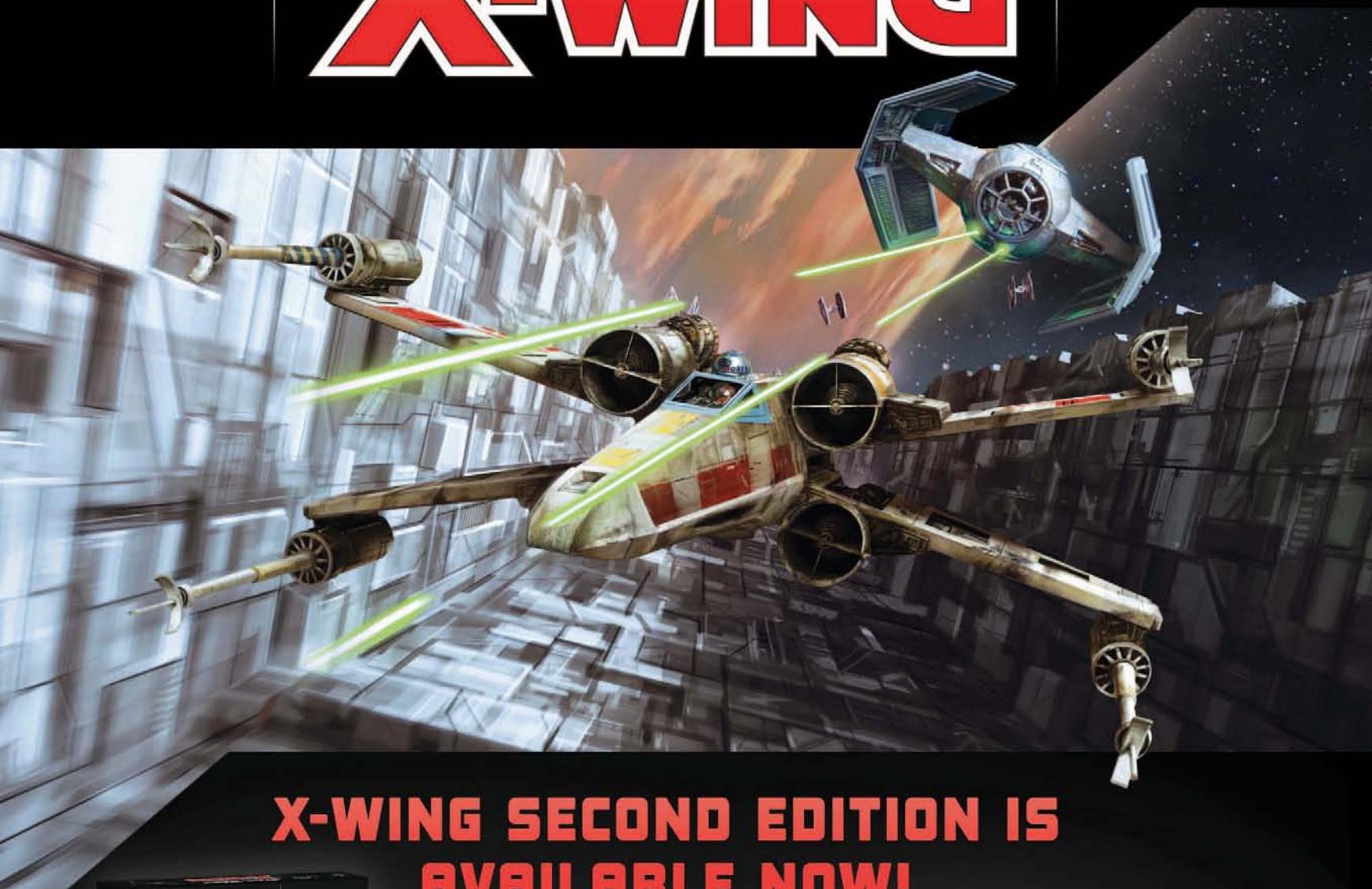


judge – Anime Limited has a standard Blu-ray of *The Testament of Sister New Devil* on 1 October.

MVM's new releases include the first season of the excellent *Higurashi* (DVD), reviewed this issue, and a Blu-ray of *Asterisk War* part one. They're both on 24 September, while the second half of *Fate/stay night: Unlimited Blade Works* reaches Blu-ray on 8 October.

Grimoire of Zero has a Blu-ray / DVD Collector's Edition on 15 October; we reviewed it last issue, calling it a "satisfyingly self-contained fantasy adventure." And to end on another retro-note, MVM is releasing a DVD collecting the 25 parts of *Love Hina*, the vintage harem comedy from 2000. How does it look alongside *Sister New Devil*, we wonder? ●

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[FILM REVIEW]

CITY HUNTER

Not the classic it could have been

OUT NOW // EUREKA // CERT 12 // COMEDY // £19.99 (BLU-RAY) // 99 MINS

PLOT When private investigator Ryo Saeba (Jackie Chan) is hired to track down the missing daughter of a business tycoon, the trail takes Ryo and his assistant Carrie (Joey Wang) aboard a luxury cruise. But the mission is complicated when terrorists led by 'Big Mac' MacDonald (Richard Norton) hijack the ship.

All the ingredients are there for *City Hunter* to be one of the finest hours in Jackie Chan's storied career. It's got a cast featuring some of the hottest names in early '90s Hong Kong cinema, with leading ladies Joey Wang and Chingmy Yau, plus Cantopop king Leon Lai, awesome screen villain Richard Norton, and director Wong Jing behind the camera. Yet the final product feels hodgepodge as though it was thrown together without due care – which is true to some extent, as the conclusion of filming was rushed to get the movie onto screens in time for the lucrative Chinese New Year weekend.

It's the only film in Chan's output that finds him paired with Hong Kong's master of shlock Wong Jing, whose style of direction often seems to involve throwing ideas at a wall just to see what sticks. The film is loosely based on the manga by Tsukasa Hojo, although Chan looks nothing like

the character in the source material. Wong treats most of the film like a live action cartoon, often speeding up the action for exaggerated comic effect and encouraging the cast to ham it up.

There's an abundance of slapstick and some of the gags work very well. Perhaps the most famous sequence in the film is the *Street Fighter* video game spoof, when Chan becomes first the sumo wrestler E. Honda (E. Honde in the movie) and then Chun Li in order to defeat MacDonald's top henchman, played by British martial arts actor Gary Daniels, who is dressed as Ken. It's very silly but the cast's gleeful exuberance helps make it work.

Some of the other gags feel much more puerile. Ken Lo has a fairly tasteless supporting role as a gay terrorist, and there are some clunky jokes about the fact that one of the ladies, played by beauty queen Carrie Wan, has big breasts that cause her to lose her balance. There's certainly no mistaking the fact that Wong Jing is at the helm. Chingmy Yau was his favourite lead actress in the '90s and here she plays the unlikeliest looking cop imaginable running around in a variety of skimpy outfits. Kumiko Goto, who plays the runaway heiress Shizuko, gives a good performance but only had a short-lived movie career.

As a director, Wong made his fortune with gambling movies which were all the rage in Hong Kong in the '80s and early '90s. Sure enough, Wong makes sure to include a gambler character in *City Hunter* in the form of Kao Ta (Leon Lai), who is not only a masterful card player but

KEY TALENT

Chingmy Yau's career followed the classic trajectory for a Hong Kong actress. She entered the industry after competing in a beauty pageant, then retired when she married a wealthy businessman.



who can wield playing cards as weapons, sending them slicing through the air to cut down his enemies. And of course there's a scene where Kao Ta has to gamble against MacDonald for his own life. This sequence is a good example of how loose a grip that Wong Jing has on the tone of the film. After taking over the cruise ship, MacDonald forces the

"...WHEN CHAN AND NORTON FINALLY CAME FACE-TO-FACE AND FIST-TO-FIST EIGHT YEARS LATER IN *CITY HUNTER*, IT WAS A SHOWDOWN THAT HAD BEEN A LONG TIME COMING."

passengers to play him at cards, shooting them dead when they lose – which doesn't sit well against the overall tone of wacky pratfalls.

Richard Norton was originally supposed to have faced Jackie Chan onscreen in Sammo Hung's *Twinkle Twinkle Lucky Stars*, which was released in 1985. Unfortunately, Chan injured his back and instead Sammo faced Norton in what became one of the finest screen fights in both men's career, a brilliant balance of Sammo's high impact action style and humour. Thus, when Chan and Norton finally

came face-to-face and fist-to-fist eight years later in *City Hunter*, it was a showdown that had been a long time coming. Alas, the climactic fight scene between the pair is something of a disappointment. That's partly due to the very plastic-looking weapons that Norton has to wield in their tussle, and the fact that the tone keeps veering back and forth between a straight fight scene and slapstick. In the aforementioned *Twinkle Twinkle*, Sammo finds the right balance between the comedy and the martial arts, but Chan and Wong don't manage the same feat here.

Happily, in 1997 Chan and Norton crossed paths again in Sammo Hung's *Mr Nice Guy*, where they had the chance to craft some first-rate action together, but it's hard not to feel a tinge of disappointment at the final showdown in *City Hunter*. More successful is a scene that references Bruce Lee's *Game Of Death* in which Ryo faces two incredibly tall opponents inside a cinema that's showing Bruce's battle against Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Struggling to overcome his enemies' advantages in height and reach at first, Ryo watches how Lee beats Abdul-Jabbar onscreen and adapts his tactics accordingly. It's a tip of the hat to Lee's continued influence on action choreography and one of the film's stronger fight scenes.

Jackie Chan rose to fame in the late '70s as the king of the kung fu comedy, but his collaboration with Wong Jing never quite clicks. There are enough jokes that some hit the mark, and a handful of memorable stunts amongst all the silliness. ●



TRIVIA

Australian-born martial artist Richard Norton was a bodyguard before becoming an actor and guarded huge stars like ABBA and The Rolling Stones on their Australian tours in the 1970s.

MANGA EXTRACT

WITCHMARKED

By Irina Richards

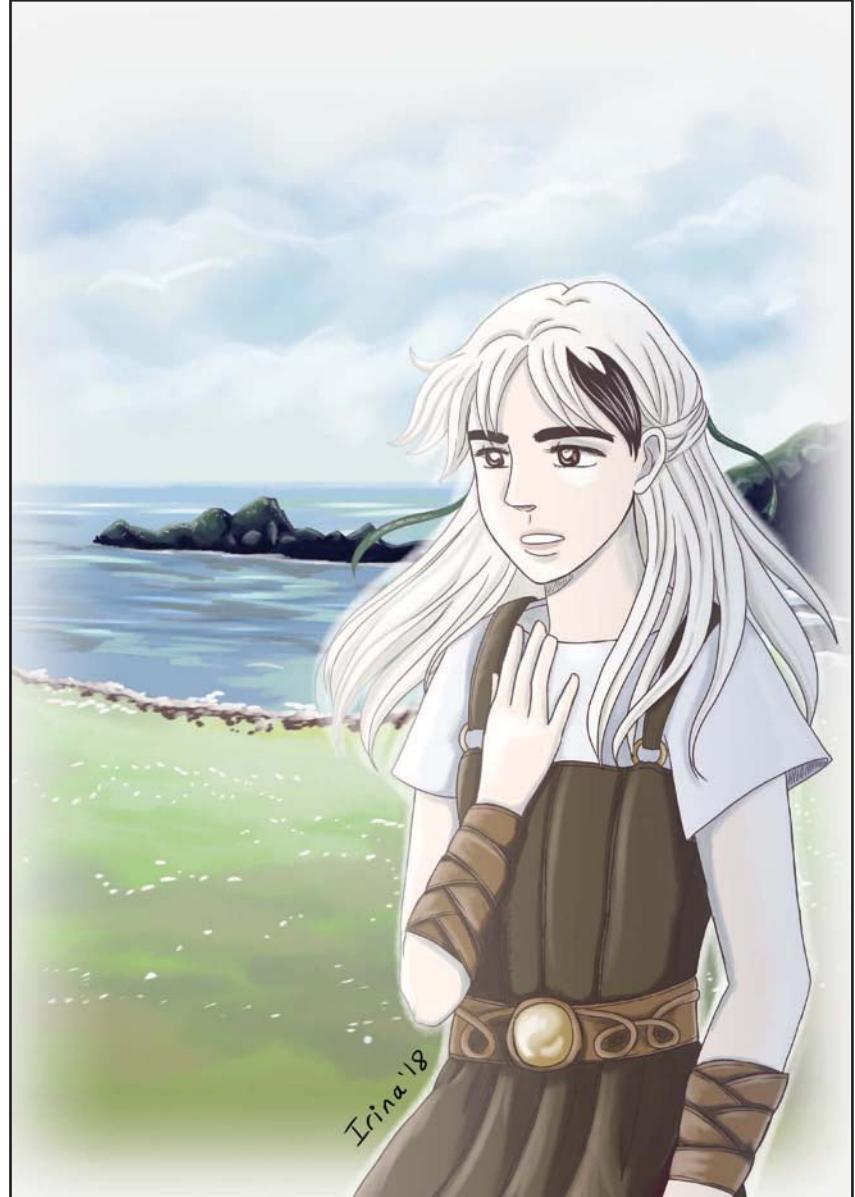
THIS ISSUE, WE'RE pleased to share with you a preview extract from Irina Richard's upcoming story *Witchmarked*. "It takes place in AD 790, during a fictional Viking raid (there are no surviving records of Viking activity in the British Isles between 789 and 793)," she tells us, of the pages to follow. "In a surprise attack on a small village, a number of local people are captured – including the story's protagonist, Iola, a 14-year-old girl who has been born with a patch of dark hair on her forehead (seen as 'a witches' mark')."

"*Witchmarked* weaves together history and mythology. It is a story of Iola's journey to a distant land which she never knew existed – leaving her old life irrevocably behind. At the same time, *Witchmarked* re-imagines storylines from Celtic myths (particularly focusing on the legend of Scathach), introducing a fantasy element. Ultimately, *Witchmarked* is a coming-of-age story of empowerment and finding your own place in an ever-changing world. *Witchmarked* is not meant to be historically accurate – it is, after all, a work of fiction. The historical setting is used more as a backdrop to the main events in the story."

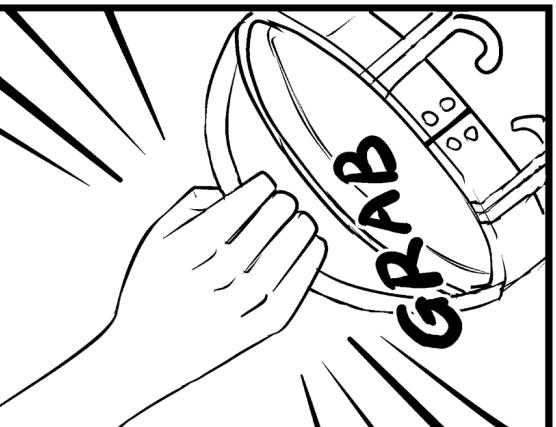
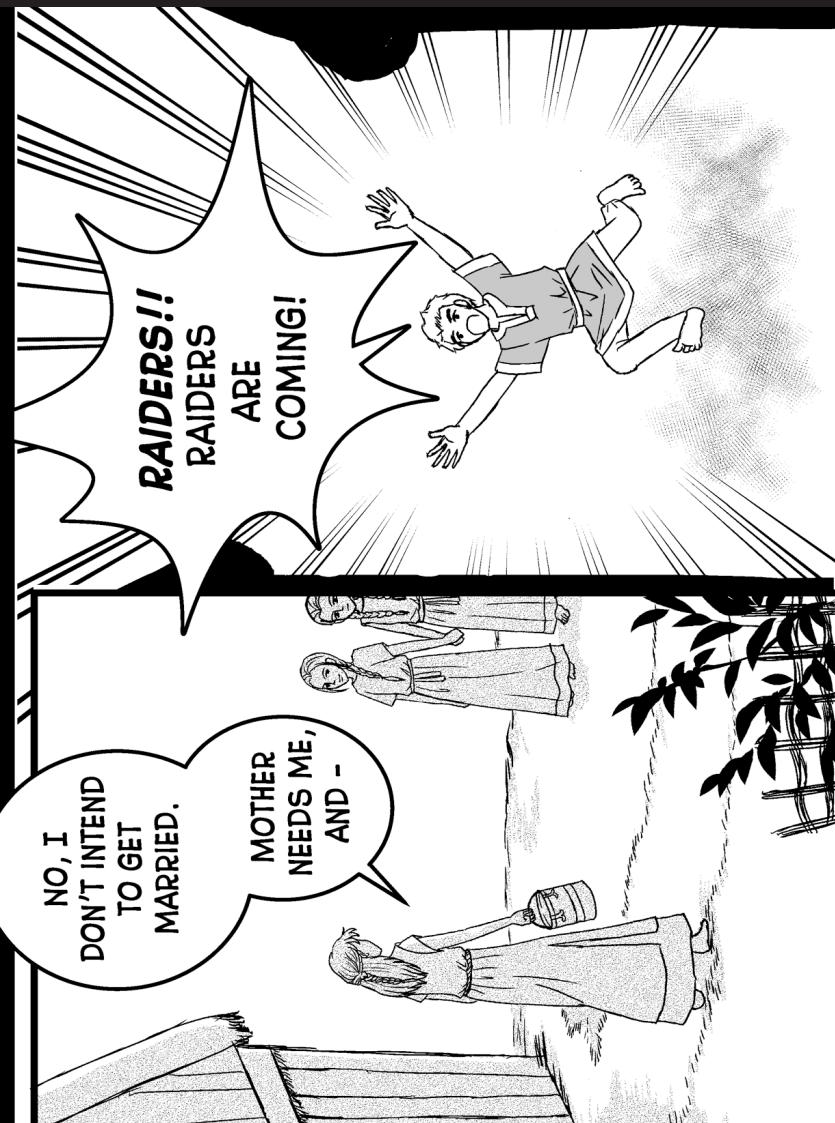
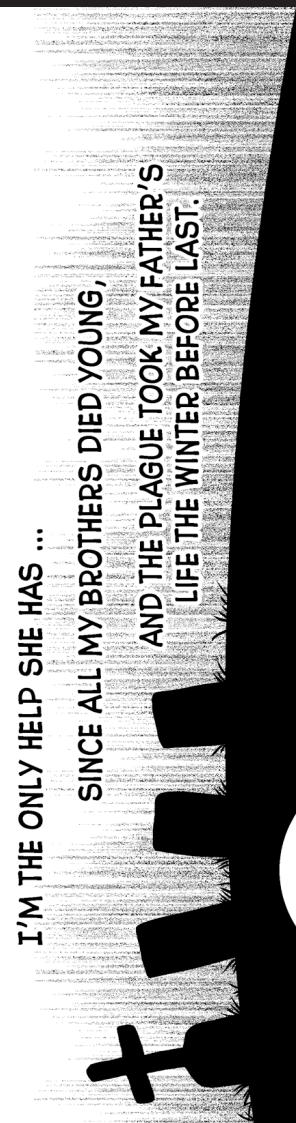
We asked Richards to tell us more about writing a story set so far in the past. "Working on *Witchmarked* is really enjoyable – it's like travelling back in time! I have always had a special interest in the history of early medieval Britain. As there are only a few reliable sources of information about life in those days, I feel that many events that took place during that time – both mundane and fundamental – will forever remain a mystery, making this time period open to speculation and interpretation. I am also fascinated by the contact (and conflict) of cultures around this time period – the power struggles between the Anglo-Saxons, Picts, Scots, and Britons before the Vikings threw themselves into the mix. Whenever I think of that time period, I always depict it in stark black and white; therefore, the dark graphic aesthetic of manga captures it perfectly. I am greatly inspired by historical manga titles such as Kaoru Mori's *A Bride's Story* and Makoto Yukimura's *Vinland Saga*, as well as historical shoujo classics from the '70s and '80s; however, I do feel that the historical manga genre is sadly underrepresented and underrated in the UK nowadays."

Of her previous projects, Richards told us, "My first graphic novel, *Chemical Blue*, was completed in 2015 and published via Sweatdrop Studios – UK's first comics collective, which I am proud to be part of. I have also co-authored an instructional book, *Creating Manga Characters*. At the moment, I am dividing my time between creating *Witchmarked*, working as an artist educator, studying for a postgraduate degree, and raising my young family."

"You can find information about my publications, events, and general goings-on on my website, www.irinarichards.com or follow me on Instagram @irinarichardsart. I am aiming to release *Witchmarked* in late 2019/early 2020 – watch this space!"













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VALKYRIA CATCHUP!

Everything you missed from the first three games in the Valkyria Chronicles franchise

IF YOU'RE JUST now finding out about the series, *Valkyria Chronicles* can be pretty much summed up with the tagline 'Anime World War II' but it's all in soft pastel shades, and sometimes people are unstoppable demigods of warfare.' Also there's flying pigs. No, really.

The games focus on the tiny nation of Gallia, the ultimate underdogs in the conflict between the unstoppable forces of the Atlantic Federation and the East European Imperial Alliance. Because of Gallia's large deposits of ragnite (a mysterious and powerful material than can power everything from tanks to portable medikits), it's only a matter of time before the Imperial forces invade the peaceful country to further their war effort.

OPENING SALVOS

Among the first casualties of war are the rural citizens of Bruhl, a small farming town close to Gallia's border, and home to Welkin Gunther and Alicia Melchiott, a mismatched pair of comrades who manage to repel the Imperial forces for long enough to evacuate the town, and go on to volunteer in the Gallian militia and take the fight back to the tyrannical empire!

Although the son of a famed Gallian general, Welkin's laid-back demeanor and lack of military training don't endear him to the new troops under his command. However, his keen mind and outside the box thinking soon win over his ragtag group of militia soldiers, not to mention the support of Alicia, and Isara, his adopted sister (and tank driver).

But despite Welkin's natural aptitude for leading a squad, the sheer

overwhelming might of the Imperial military causes them no end of problems, especially the Emperor Maximilian's newest secret weapon – Selvaria Bles, descendant of an ancient and powerful race known as the Valkyria. The Valkyria, thought long-extinct, had a natural connection to the mineral of ragnite that fueled their godlike powers, but the Valkyria aren't as long-forgotten as most would have thought, and the Empire isn't the only one with a member of the race on their side!

During their conflict, Alicia awakens to her own dormant Valkyria abilities, but though her powers might be enough to help the squad repel Selvaria's assault, the militia are unable to keep Maximilian from wiping out the vast majority of the Gallian army. However, undeterred, Welkin rallies his troops to make one final attack on Maximilian and his devastating new superweapon. Despite all the odds, Welkin, Alicia, and the rest of the squad are victorious, saving their homeland and earning the happy ending that the game closes with. However, theirs isn't the only war story of note in the chronicles of this conflict!

SCHOOLYARD SOLDIERS!

Two years after the release of the first game, *Valkyria Chronicles II* was released for the PSP. Also set two years after the events of its predecessor, the sequel follows another diverse group of Gallian freedom fighters, this time the cadets of the Lanseal Military Academy. But they aren't up against the Imperial Forces, but rather, forced to take on their own countrymen, some of whom, dissatisfied with the state of their country following the war, have risen up to form a rebel



force that dedicates itself to a campaign of ethnic cleansing, focused on the Gallians descended from a tribe known as the Darcens.

Avan Hardins, a promising young student at the Lanseal Academy, had enough problems in his life just surviving the competitive atmosphere of his academic life, but when this civil war breaks out, he and his team are thrust into the battlefield far earlier than they ever expected!

Throughout the campaign, Avan and his squad are forced to fight against – and ally themselves with – members of the mythical Valkyrian race. However, it soon transpires that Dirk, the evil mastermind behind the Gallian Civil War, is actually one of a new breed of artificially-created Valkyrians, so while he may not have their mystical heritage, he's still got all the fiendish power of one!

Avan's unexpected campaign takes him all the way to the heart of Gallia, where he and his loyal band of cadets fight their way through to the capital city of Randgriz, liberating territory after territory on their way. There are battles, tragedies, and betrayals aplenty on both sides of the conflict – not least when it is revealed that the fiendish Dirk is actually Avan's older brother Leon! Eventually, though, the Gallian cadets are led to victory, proving their worth not only to their superior officers but to themselves!

UNRECORDED CHRONICLES

If you didn't even realise that there was a *Valkyria Chronicles 3*, well, there's probably a good reason for that. The PSP-exclusive title only saw a release in Japan, meaning that it never got the chance to make a worldwide splash.

Which – as you'll come to find out – is oddly appropriate, as the game's characters are also kept out of the spotlight...

Kurt Irving and the rest of his team are known as 'The Nameless', a black-ops squadron of war criminals, deserters, and other offenders who have been forced into military service once again – to do the jobs that the Gallian Militia won't do, or simply can't be seen doing by civilians and the press.

However, while the brass only refer to The Nameless by numbers, they do all have their own names and stories to tell, and soon become a close-knit team, despite the traumatic lives they've all led in one way or another. Although their missions start out as strictly clandestine, their prowess in battle eventually convinces the Gallian Commanders to bring The Nameless into the spotlight as a full-fledged military unit, allowing the squad to redeem themselves in the eyes of their people, and their leader Kurt finally gets the chance to get justice from the corrupt General who framed him for treason...

Though they're still a somewhat dysfunctional team compared to the rest of the Gallian militia, The Nameless still manage to foil plans to activate an Imperial superweapon shortly after the events of *VC1*, making them every bit as heroic as Welkin's more clean-cut and presentable squadron of famed veterans! Like the original *Valkyria Chronicles* and the latest title in the franchise, *Valkyria Chronicles 3* took place during the Second European War, giving players a whole-new, and altogether darker, perspective on the world of the *Valkyria Chronicles* series. ●

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VALKYRIA CHRONICLES 4

Valkyria Chronicles, one of the PS3's flagship titles, is coming back to consoles with a new adventure of war-torn heroism and friendship, this time in a setting where no brave Gallian soldiers have ever ventured before... This month, NEO's Jacob Boniface chats with Andrew Davis, one of the title's producers, about what sets this new game apart from the crowd.



Engine of War!

Valkyria Chronicles' unique art style is powered by the Canvas Engine, a proprietary engine designed by SEGA's artists to evoke the feeling of watercolours in an artist's weathered sketchbook, while still utilising hi-res 3D models.



The year was 1935. The place? The (fictional) continent of Europa. As Imperial tanks and troops rolled in to invade the small but plucky nation of Gallia, a mere handful of brave soldiers stood in the way to defend their people, and their homeland.

While fans of strategy games from around the world will likely be familiar with the exploits of *Valkyria Chronicles'* Welkin, Alicia, and the rest of their squad (and if not, check out our *Valkyria Chronicles* primer on page 010 for all the info you need on the series' previous games!), but they were far from being the only team of heroes holding back the onslaught of the Imperial war machine. The newest entry in the series, *Valkyria Chronicles 4*, tells the hitherto unsung story of Claude Wallace, the commander of an European Federation squad, as he takes his team on a daring mission deep behind enemy lines, to strike at the very heart of Imperial territory.

As the launch of *Valkyria Chronicles 4* neared, we were lucky enough to get the chance to pick the brain of Andrew Davis – the producer for the new game's American localisation team – about the fourth *Valkyria Chronicles* title, and what new players can expect from the game.

Sequels are always difficult to pull off, especially for a cult hit like the original *Valkyria Chronicles* was, but Davis felt confident that both new players and fans of the franchise would be pleased with the new title, especially the storyline – something which *Valkyria Chronicles* has always been praised for. "With

a loyal crew of squadmates and friends under his command, Claude matures as a leader on the battlefield with a string of early victories – but then the war takes a turn he couldn't foresee, and Claude finds himself grappling with the true test of a leader: How much are you willing to sacrifice in service of the mission? Are there lines you won't cross?"

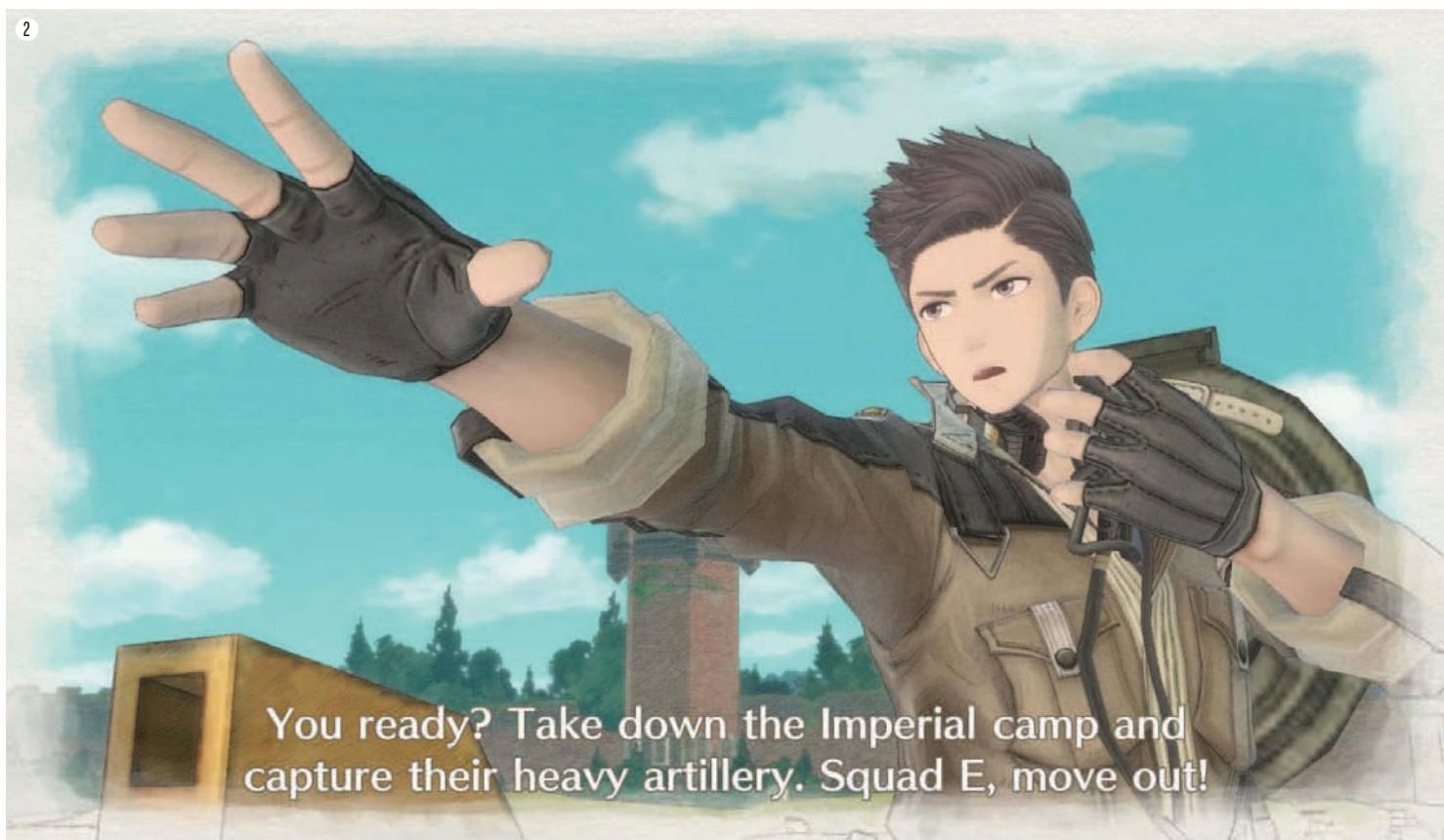
New hero Claude has some large boots (or in his case, tank treads) to fill, but luckily, he looks set to be the kind of interesting and likeable protagonist that fans have come to expect from the *Valkyria Chronicles* series. Of course, one man does not a military squad make, and Claude is joined by a full cast of diverse, and often eccentric, characters in the line of duty.

One of the most exciting and perilous aspects of *Valkyria Chronicles*' gameplay has always been that your squadmates can die at any time. Though it can be positively heart-wrenching to have a favourite character bite the bullet in the midst of a ferocious battle, it has to be said that that mechanic definitely adds to the tension of each encounter immeasurably. One of *Valkyria Chronicles 4*'s newest features is an expanded role for those squadmates.

"If you use a character in battle enough times, you'll unlock a special optional side story that explores their personality and relationships with the rest of the squad," says Davis, referring to this new feature for the console games which the development team has carried over from the original game's two PSP-exclusive sequels. "Finish this story, and your squadmates will learn a life lesson that improves their performance in battle."

While it seems like the main storyline of the game will still follow the core crew of comrades, it's going to be interesting to see what effect these side-stories will have on the outcome of the game's missions and overall plot – and it'll likely be even more soul destroying when your favourites perish on the

2



Canine Comrade!

The most popular of the Squad E characters looks very likely to be a soldier known as 'Ragnarok'. Despite his dramatic-sounding name, don't be fooled, as Ragnarok is actually an adorable military pup! Resembling a real-life Shiba Inu breed, Ragnarok (or 'Rags' to the team) is a trained field medic, and the squad's official mascot, as well as looking adorable as he sports a jaunty hat!



battlefield, so keep them safe out there!

PAINTS AND PANZERS

However, it isn't all doom and gloom in the midst of a harrowing world war – or at least, not in the world of *Valkyria Chronicles*. The series has become known for the pleasing pastel shades that it uses for its art style, an almost dreamy, illustrative look that works to reinforce the game's motif of a weighty tome, a literal chronicle of the derring-do and bravery of the characters under your command. Though things can (and do) get dark throughout the story, the game's soft art and the easy camaraderie of the troops ease off some of the tension before things get too overwhelming.

Of course, the visual art is but one element of the game's appeal, and *Valkyria Chronicles* has always been practically synonymous with excellent voice acting talent, which is also a hugely important part of bringing the characters to life. "I'm enormously thrilled with our main cast – every one of them hit it out of the park," says Davis of *Valkyria Chronicles 4*'s voice



actors, "but the actor for Kai in particular nailed the mix of 'cool, collected sniper' and 'quietly conflicted' that we needed as the story went along."

Of the minor characters, who can often be just as beloved (or sometimes even more so) as the main cast, Davis was hard pressed to choose the best performance: "They're all so wacky and lovable it's hard to pick a favorite, but Thomas Kevin is a strong contender. The poor guy thinks he's so deep, making everyone call him 'Odin' and spouting glorious overdramatic nonsense like 'My bullets seek your soul!', but the instant he's in danger his voice jumps up an octave and he covers in fear."

The aforementioned sniper Kai is but one of the several classes players can control on the battlefield. For those of you who haven't gotten hands-on with any of the *Valkyria Chronicles* titles before, the games are a curious blend of strategy and real-time action. Players control the larger strategy elements of their campaign – outfitting troops, choosing deployments, and so on – before selecting said troops and controlling them right there on >>>

1. The close-knit commanders of Squad E, pose in front of their greatest asset, the tough yet nimble Hafen tank. 2. Squad E's Captain, Claude Wallace, cuts a striking figure as he mobilises his troops against the Empire. 3. Though far greater in numbers, the faceless Imperial goons lack the spirit of the player's brave Federation soldiers!



>>> the ground in bursts of third-person action. Though the game is turn-based, your soldiers still react to the ever-changing battle even on the enemy's turn. In fact, setting up an ambush or strong defensive position can be every bit as crucial to victory as storming a base camp or making headshots, and battles can be won or lost on how well you plan for the turns ahead.

"They wanted to recreate the excitement and tension of battlefield life depicted in WWII movies," Davis related of the development team's vision for VC4, "but with the less twitchy, more cerebral controls of a strategy-RPG, where your dominance on the field depends entirely on your tactical decisions."

CLASS WAR!

In addition to snipers and tanks, characters fit into the classes of SMG-wielding Stormtroopers, fleet-footed Scouts, rocketeering Lancers, or supportive Engineers.

Each class is crucial to success, and managing them effectively to make the best use of their strengths is really what the game is all about.

For example, machine gun nests will make mincemeat out of your Scouts and Engineers, but clear the way with a few well-placed Sniper shots (or even bull through with a tank shell) and the battlefield opens up for the rest of your troops. While all these classes have appeared in the previous games,

and the synergies between them have been well-established, the development team weren't content to rest on their laurels, adding new elements to mix up the tried-and-true formula.

"Grenadiers are a new wild-card combat class that give you long-distance explosive attacks, but at the same time, enemy Grenadiers can make battlefield traversal a much more harrowing experience," explained Davis, of the series' newest class.

In one of the opening missions of the game – in which the surprisingly chirpy grenadier Riley comes to the aid of Squad E – the grenadier class proves invaluable in besieging a previously unconquerable fortress, so it seems likely that the class will be a key part of the series' gameplay going forward, as well as a new obstacle for seasoned *Valkyria Chronicles* players to contend with.

VALKYRIA'S VILLAINS!

Speaking of the enemies in the way of Claude and the rest of Squad E, the Imperial side isn't without its eclectic characters as well. *Valkyria Chronicles* has always been a series that's well-loved for its villains, which isn't a surprising feature. After a lengthy battle, and an even lengthier campaign, there's nothing more satisfying than wiping the smug grin off the face of an Imperial general who thought they could stomp all over your fledgling team of underdogs.

"We've got a real rogue's gallery of Imperials this time around! There's happy-go-lucky playboy general Klaus Walz, living his best life as he realises your hero Claude Wallace is the best challenge he's faced in years. On the polar opposite end from the gregarious Walz is the sullen, humorless young man known as Forseti, but what he lacks in friendliness he makes up for in tactical brilliance."



"ONE THING WE DID CARRY OVER FROM THE PSP TITLES WAS AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR SUB-CHARACTERS. THEY MAY NOT IMPACT THE MAIN STORY MUCH, AND THEY CAN PERMANENTLY DIE AT ANY TIME."

"Crymaria Levin is a Valkyria, a woman born with powers of an ancient bloodline, but her inability to properly control her powers takes a severe toll on her body every time she uses them. And then there's Nikola and Chiara, a bloodthirsty pair of enhanced super-soldiers utterly devoted to their mad-scientist overlord..."

All these naughty adversaries sound like they'll be more than a match for Claude – and by extension, the players themselves. The inclusion of a Valkyria character is another interesting addition to the roster – though the title would suggest that the eponymous superhuman warriors are heavily featured, the descendants of that ancient race, whose abilities can make or break a battle, are actually incredibly rare. In previous games, certain key members of the squad exhibited their own superpowers (check out our primer section to find out who!), and players were able to use them to wreak havoc on the battlefield, but as to whether any of Squad E's members will be similarly imbued, well, we'll just have to play the full game to find out!

DREAM TEAM-UP!

Speaking of those former games' characters, we were eager to find out whether or not any of the fan favourites we've come

to know over campaigns gone by will be making their own appearances in the new game.

"Not in the main storyline, which is all-new and set hundreds of miles from *Valkyria Chronicles 1*'s country of Gallia," said Davis, before going on to add, "however, there will be downloadable bonus missions available for purchase! *Advance Ops* is a short mission best played early on; finish it and you'll get Edy from *Valkyria Chronicles 1*! *A United Front with Squad 7* is more meaty and features a few joint missions where Claude's Squad E travels to Gallia to meet the main crew of VCI's Squad 7—Welkin, Alicia, Rosie, Largo, and Isara. Fans with the *Memoirs from Battle* special edition of the game will get these bonus missions along with scores of other goodies, but the missions will also be made available for purchase by the general public at a later date."

Though the chance to catch up with some old faces from the original game sounds tantalising enough, the *Memoirs from Battle* Collector's Edition also has a few extra bonus goodies that make it a tempting buy. In addition to the previously mentioned extra missions, the game also comes packaged in a swanky collector's box, with a one-hundred page artbook in the style of commander Clade Wallace's >>>

4. Claude opens up to friend and tank pilot Miles Arbeck in one of the game's story sections. 5. One of the series' main themes is the contrast between the beauty of nature, and the ugliness of man-made warfare. 6. Tanks are a vital part of your campaign, providing excellent strategies in both offensive and defensive gameplay.

Brothers in Arms!

While not *actually* siblings, the core group of *Valkyria Chronicles 4*'s Squad E do have a shared upbringing, as they volunteered for the military to protect their mutual hometown. However, their shared past might not always be an asset, as old wounds threaten to re-emerge under the stress of battle...



"WHILE ONE OF THE PRIMARY CONCEPTS WAS A RETURN TO THE CORE GAMEPLAY OF *VALKYRIA CHRONICLES 1* (AFTER THE SHAKEUPS OF THE PSP TITLES), THE DESIGN TEAM DID ADD SEVERAL NEW WRINKLES TO COMBAT." **ANDREW DAVIS**

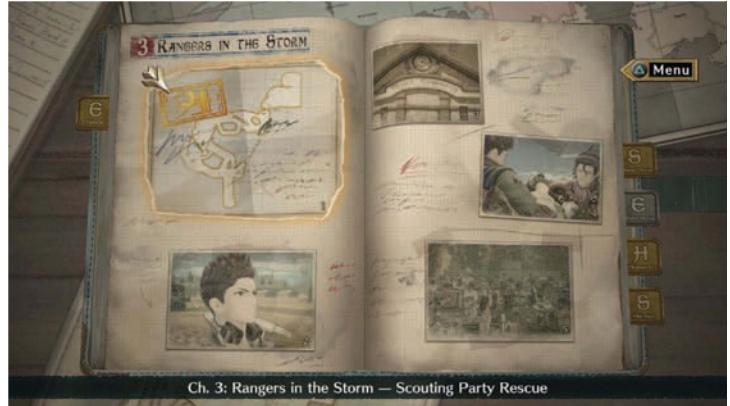
>>> war journal (no doubt packed with behind the scenes info and concept art!), as well as a gorgeous looking statue of Squad E's flagship tank – the *Hafen* – as it trundles into battle over a snowy landscape.

While on the surface, *Valkyria Chronicles* seems to be a simple mashup of grand strategy and third-person action, the games in this series are, when at their best, a lot more than the sum of their parts – inspiring and engaging fans of both genres, or even those completely new to either. Part of this is definitely down to the simple but captivating setting, the plotlines that weave dexterously between dark war stories and endearing character moments, and the incredible amount of care that has gone into the series' visual aesthetic.



Davis notes of the development team over at SEGA, "The original game came out ten years ago, and I'm honestly surprised no one's copied its ideas, but here we are now and it's still as fresh and distinctive as it was then." And from all the details about *Valkyria Chronicles 4* so far, it sounds like the newest game will be a genuinely worthy successor to what is quickly becoming a series with an justly popular legacy when it comes to both strategy gaming, and the pastime as a whole.

Players will be able to get their hands on *Valkyria Chronicles 4* on 25 September, on the PS4, Xbox One, PC, or Nintendo Switch, and finally take those pesky Imperials to task once and for all! ●



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JAPAN MANGA TOUR 2019

TOUR INCLUDES

- Visit to Ghibli Museum, designed by Japan's top animator Hayao Miyazaki – Academy Award winner for "Spirited Away"
- Guided tour of Tokyo – the world's busiest, wildest and wackiest city!
- Visit to Akihabara – famous for dozens of animation shops and electronic goods
- 6 nights hotel accommodation at a 3-star hotel and Japanese breakfast daily
- Airport transfers from and to Narita Airport (Tokyo New International)
- Services of a knowledgeable, bilingual Japan Journeys guide throughout
- Lots of FUN, ADVENTURE & LAUGHS!!
- Scheduled return economy class flights including taxes

PRICE: £2,145 PER PERSON

for a room on a shared basis

FOR FURTHER DETAILS CALL

020 7766 5267

OR EMAIL

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